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Jatin Verma's Current
Affairs Magazine
(April, 2021)



Dear Aspirants,

Once again, with a new vigour and renewed enthusiasm, we are continuing with our monthly Current Affairs Magazine. The immense response that we have received for our Magazine is what keeps us motivated to do better every time. We are delighted to present before you this well-crafted magazine for the month of **April 2021**. The aspirants have shown great response to our efforts **since the 1st release of the magazine in August 2018**.

I take this opportunity to thank all my readers for being our motivation to pursue this magazine as well as the "Daily News Analysis Course". I want to thank you all again for the enormous response for our newly launched **mobile application: "The JV's Application"**. You will be able to access the following features: **Practice Mock Tests, Download PDF files, JV's Magazine, Mind Maps, JV's Podcasts**. The Students can access the expert guidance and study material on their Mobile phones from every nook and corner of the country. It is a One-Stop solution at the palm of your hand!!

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What's inside?

By keeping UPSC CSE exams as the focal point, our magazine has incorporated all the important happenings in India and around the world for the month of April 2021. The Magazine has been compartmentalized according to the CSE Syllabus thereby reducing the workload of the aspirants. Starting with our Focus Articles, we have gone a step further to cater to the needs of the Interview qualified candidates. Two most burning issues: **"Left wing extremism and counterinsurgency strategy and Police reform recommendations exist. So why have they not been implemented? - are dealt with in detail to shape their perception.**

Special Features:

Jatin Verma's Prelims Corner, Background of the Issue, Map-Based Geography Questions, Smart Arts, Charts & Diagrams, Case Studies, Important SC Judgments, Important Cases for arguments.

Letter from the Editor's desk

Must-read articles- that you shouldn't miss out:

1. Supreme Court for posting retired judges to clear backlog in High Courts
2. Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991
3. Explained: Why Saudi Arabia has raised oil shipping costs to Asia in response to India cutting imports
4. Time tests ties: On India-Russia relations
5. Junk inefficiency: On vehicle scrappage policy
6. Ken-Betwa River Interlinking Project
7. The net-zero goal & India
8. Explained: How & why of oxygen therapy
9. NASA Mars helicopter makes first flight on another planet
10. Perseverance mission produced oxygen on Mars

I am sure this endeavour will help the aspirants. It is up to you to make the best use of it to succeed in UPSC Civil Services examinations.

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Happy learning,
Jatin Verma

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Left wing extremism and counterinsurgency strategy

The killing of 22 security personnel by Maoists in Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh serves as a grim reminder that left-wing insurgency continues to be one of the biggest internal security threats for the country.

Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) in India

- LWE situation is the most serious internal threat facing the country.
- The ideology of left-wing extremism is deeply influenced by **Marxist and other communist and socialist practices.**
- The naxal movement came to Andhra Pradesh with peasants' revolt in tribal dominated Srikalulam region in December 1968.
- It soon spread to coastal areas and later to Telangana and Rayalaseema districts.
- LWE organizations are the groups that try to bring change through violent revolution. They are against democratic institutions and use violence to subvert the democratic processes at ground level.
- These groups prevent the developmental processes in the least developed regions of the country & try to misguide the people by keeping them ignorant of current happenings.
- A significant change came about with the merger of the **People's War Group and the MCC to form the CPI (Maoist) in 2004.**
- Thus, there had been a fusion of the ideology with the armed groups, both coming together for the first time.

LWE affected states:

- As many as nine Indian states are bearing the brunt of Naxalism.
- Of these, **Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh are worst-affected** while Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal are partially affected.
- Andhra Pradesh and Bihar remain the hot-bed of PWG and MCC operations.
- **The ultra-leftist groups active in Bihar** are - The most dreaded 'Maoist Communist Centre', CPI(ML) Liberation, CPI (ML) Peoples War, Mazdoor Kisan Sangram Samiti, CPI(ML) Janashakti, CPI(ML) Towards New Democracy and small groups like Santosh Rana group, Shantipal group, Kanu Sanyal group and Jeetender group.
- **People's War Group**, formed by Kondapalli Seetharamaiah (KS) on April 22, 1980, is the most dominant naxalite force in Andhra Pradesh.

Declining violence

- **In the past few years, Maoist violence is receding.**
- The government has, in fact, had some major successes in the form of arrests and surrender of important Maoist leaders.
- But this drop could be the result of a **“tactical withdrawal” by the Maoists.**
- The attack should thus serve as a wake-up call to those who had begun to get complacent about the Maoist threat.

Key strengths of Maoists:

- The Maoist strategy is that not only do they oppose development, development as they see it, development in a parliamentary democracy, but also they take advantage of this feeling of neglect in remote underdeveloped areas
- It appears that Maoists continue to hold on to their key strengths which include:

- ✓ a robust and efficient intelligence network;
- ✓ the devolution of authority to local commanders;
- ✓ an ability to quickly readjust their strategy;
- ✓ extensive support from local tribes and the ability to organise them into a tribal militia for short-term tactical purposes and
- ✓ domination of the local landscape.

The Counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy of India

- India began using the COIN strategy with its first full-blown insurgency in Nagaland in the 1950s.
- **People-centric approach:** One strategy says that given the Maoist insurgency posturing itself as a “people’s war”, the mandate is for a people-centric approach of “winning hearts and minds” that is built on the notions of competitive state-building to address economic and governance deficiencies.
- **Enemy-centric approach:** The other strategy argues that an enemy-centric approach predicated on kinetic operations is best suited for the Maoist insurgency, where the fear of the population seceding from India is remote.
 - ✓ Most of the states have raised special forces on the lines of **Greyhounds**, and are being given rigorous training in “**counter-guerrilla**” tactics and jungle warfare.
 - ✓ **Greyhounds:** It was raised in 1989 as an elite anti-naxal force.
- **Mixed strategy:** But the Andhra government based its **COIN strategy** on a judicious mix of the enemy-centric and population-centric approaches.
 - ✓ The successes achieved by the Greyhounds, Andhra’s elite special force, could only be consolidated through the robust implementation of short-gestation-period developmental works in the Maoist-affected rural areas.
 - ✓ Moreover, the erstwhile state is also the first state to have a comprehensive surrender-cum-rehabilitation policy.
- **Surrender and rehabilitation policies:** After the 2014 guidelines of the central government were brought out, many states have crafted attractive surrender and rehabilitation policies.
 - ✓ A surrender and rehabilitation policy only works when there is sustained military pressure on the Maoists.
- **SAMADHAN:** It stands for
 - ✓ S- Smart Leadership,
 - ✓ A- Aggressive Strategy,
 - ✓ M- Motivation and Training,
 - ✓ A- Actionable Intelligence,
 - ✓ D- Dashboard Based KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) and KRAs (Key Result Areas)
 - ✓ H- Harnessing Technology,
 - ✓ A- Action plan for each Theatre, and
 - ✓ N- No access to Financing.
- This doctrine is the **one-stop solution for the LWE problem**. It encompasses the **entire strategy of government from short-term policy to long-term policy** formulated at different levels.

Way forward: Indian counterinsurgency has to work with a dual objective of defeating the insurgents militarily and fully quell the insurgent impulses.

- **Superior state guerilla:** A Maoist guerrilla can only be countered by a state guerrilla.
 - ✓ The operating environment of these special forces has to demonstrate the employment of superior tactics to defeat the insurgents, something which at times seems lacking. Besides, the Maoists have mastered the art of exploiting the grey zone areas.

- ✓ The jungles around the interstate borders have always been the preferred hiding spaces for the Maoists.
- **Synergy between states:** States must do more to synergise their efforts by launching coordinated operations, thereby denying Maoists any space for manoeuvrability.
 - ✓ These efforts need to be supplemented by well-crafted development schemes. Proper implementation and timely disbursal of benefits add to the credibility of the government policies.
 - ✓ It is also important to segregate the population from the insurgents both operationally and ideologically.
- **Employing mixed strategy:** This will need institutional overhauls.
 - ✓ **The conflict over the distribution of resources** can be mended with economic development, but the bigger challenge would be to create a system where the tribal population feels that the government is representative, not repressive.
 - ✓ **Opening negotiation channels and policies like surrender** and rehabilitation can give such a representative sense to the rebels that the government cares for them if they (rebels) are willing to shun the violent path.

The asymmetry in the distribution of power cannot solely be ironed out by just economic policies, it is critically important to create a system where the distribution of power is not controlled by the traditional elite.

Police reform recommendations exist. So why have they not been implemented?

The Bombay High Court allowed the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to conduct a preliminary enquiry into the allegations of malpractices by Maharashtra Home Minister levelled by former Commissioner of Mumbai Police.

- A PIL was filed under Article 226 of the Constitution of India seeking an immediate, unbiased, fair investigation on the various corrupt malpractices of the home minister.
- It also prayed that transfer of police officers are neither done on any consideration of pecuniary benefits to any politicians nor in contravention of the guidelines issued in **Prakash Singh & others**.
- As per CJI, it is an extraordinary case where the Petitioner has accused HM and thinks the state police is biased. And this is the reason he didn't file an FIR.

Concerns:

- The developments in Maharashtra in Commissioner Param Bir Singh's case expose the **unholy nexus between politicians, bureaucrats, police and criminals**.
- Our systems, whether of the police or judiciary, are army-like, dedicated to command structures. They are **lacking morality or integrity** and wedded to undying obedience.
- It raises questions on the **protection of the whistleblower**.

Directions of the Supreme Court in Prakash Singh vs Union of India

In Prakash Singh v. Union of India, the SC relied on the eight reports of the National Police Commission (1979-1981) appointed by the Union.

- **Constitute a State Security Commission** in every state that will lay down policy for police functioning, evaluate police performance, and ensure that state governments do not exercise unwarranted influence on the police.
- **Constitute a Police Establishment Board** in every state that will decide postings, transfers and promotions for officers below the rank of Deputy Superintendent of Police, and make recommendations to the state government for officers of higher ranks.

- **Constitute Police Complaints Authorities** at the state and district levels to inquire into allegations of serious misconduct and abuse of power by police personnel.
 - ✓ The commission recommended that there should be a PCA at the state level, headed by a retired judge of the SC or high court chosen out of a panel of names proposed by the chief justice of the state.
 - ✓ A similar structure was envisaged for the PCA at the district level.
 - ✓ In addition, the PCAs would be assisted by members selected by the state from panels prepared by the **State Human Rights Commission, Lokayuktas** and the **State Public Service Commissions**.
 - ✓ The state PCA would look into murder, rape and other serious misconduct committed by the police while the district PCA would look into extortion, and incidents involving serious abuse of authority.
 - ✓ The recommendations of the PCA would be **binding on the state**.
- **Provide a minimum tenure of at least two years for the DGP and other key police officers** (e.g., officers in charge of a police station and district) within the state forces, and the Chiefs of the central forces to protect them against arbitrary transfers and postings.
- **Ensure that the DGP of state police is appointed from amongst three senior-most officers** who have been empanelled for the promotion by the Union Public Service Commission on the basis of length of service, good record and experience.
- **Separate the investigating police** from the law and order police to ensure speedier investigation, better expertise and improved rapport with the people.
- **Constitute a National Security Commission** to shortlist the candidates for appointment as Chiefs of the central armed police forces.

Poor implementation of recommendations

- The provision regarding the **selection of and minimum tenure for the DGP post** has had partial effect. Corruption, politicking, and patronage-seeking at the top is so endemic that this provision has lost its sting.
- **The State Security Commission** consisting of the Home Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, the Chief Secretary, the DGP and five independent members is ineffective.
- The Commission's recommendation that there ought to be a **separation between the investigation and prosecution wings**, as is the system in many developed countries, required immediate enforcement by the judiciary.
 - ✓ It would require that **police department be placed not under the Home Minister**, the source of the corruption in the first place, but under the Ministry of Law and Justice. This was never done.
- **PCA:** Affidavits filed in the SC showed that not a single state or UT has implemented the PCA provision.
 - ✓ Though most states have notified the PCA, thus making formal compliance, the appointments have not been made of retired judges chosen out of a panel as aforesaid.
 - ✓ This most important provision ensuring independence, has been made a mockery of by not constituting panels and by appointing officials as chairpersons in the place of retired judges.
 - ✓ In many states, the name Police Complaints Authority has been changed, diverting attention away from the fact that the commission is for entertaining complaints against police persons.
 - ✓ The centre notified a Public Grievance Commission as PCA and said that since there were bodies such as the National Human Rights Commission situated at Delhi it was not necessary to have a PCA.
 - ✓ Thus, on police reform, the recommendations exist, the SC order has been made but the Union remains defiant.

There is a petition pending in the SC since 2013 asking for the implementation of the Prakash Singh directives. Perhaps, now, after the Maharashtra fiasco, the SC may decide that this case pending for eight years merits listing.

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CONSTITUTION POLITY AND GOVERNANCE



How Supreme Court chooses the Chief Justice of India

Chief Justice of India S A Bobde has officially recommended the second most senior Judge of the Supreme Court, Justice N V Ramana, as his successor.

- Ramana will take over from CJI Bobde, who is due to demit office on April 23, and serve as the 48th Chief Justice of India till August 26, 2022.
- Supreme Court judges all have to **retire at age 65**.
- The official letter recommending Justice Ramana's name was forwarded to the Centre.
- He enrolled as an Advocate in 1983 after completing his legal education.
- He was elevated as a permanent Judge of the Andhra Pradesh High Court and Acting Chief Justice of the High Court.

Appointment of Chief Justice of India

- The Constitution of India does not have any provision for criteria and procedure for appointing the CJI.
- **Article 124(1)** of the Indian Constitution says there "shall be a Supreme Court of India consisting of a Chief Justice of India".
- **Article 126:** When the office of Chief Justice of India is vacant or when the Chief Justice is, by reason of absence or otherwise, unable to perform the duties of his office, the duties of the office shall be performed by such one of the other Judges of the Court as the President may appoint for the purpose.

What is the procedure?

- The procedure to appoint the next CJI is laid out in the **Memorandum of Procedure (MoP)** between the government and the judiciary.
- As per the Memorandum of Procedure (MoP), the sitting chief justice writes a recommendation for his successor.
- The procedures for the appointment of members of the higher judiciary states that the appointment to the office of the Chief Justice of India should be of the senior-most judge of the Supreme Court considered fit to hold the office.
- The rules stipulate that **the law minister would seek the recommendation of the outgoing Chief Justice of India for the appointment of the next CJI** at an appropriate time.
- The Chief Justice of India then recommends the name of the second senior-most judge as per the convention.
- After receiving recommendation from the CJI, **the law minister forwards it to the Prime Minister who then advises the President on the same**.
- The **President administers the oath of office** to the new CJI.
- **No government's role:** Except for the law minister seeking the recommendation from the incumbent CJI and forwarding it to the Prime Minister, the government has no say whatsoever in the appointment of the CJI.

How seniority is decided?

- The Chief Justice of India is **traditionally appointed by the outgoing Chief Justice of India on the day of his (or her) retirement**.
- By convention, the outgoing Chief Justice of India selects the most senior then-sitting Supreme Court judge.
- Seniority at the apex court is determined not by age, but by:

- The date a judge was appointed to the Supreme Court.
- If two judges are elevated to the Supreme Court on the same day,
 - ✓ the one who was sworn in first as a judge would trump another;
 - ✓ if both were sworn in as judges on the same day, the one with more years of high court service would 'win' in the seniority stakes;
 - ✓ an appointment from the bench would 'trump' in seniority an appointee from the bar.

Here is why the electoral bonds scheme must go

The Supreme Court, after a brief hearing on March 24, reserved orders on the question of whether or not to stay the electoral bond scheme, ahead of the upcoming State elections.

Background

- Electoral bonds have been the dominant method of political party funding in India.
- Electoral bonds allow for limitless and anonymous corporate donations to political parties. For this reason, they are deeply destructive of democracy, and violate core principles of the Indian Constitution.
- The government has attempted to justify the electoral bonds scheme by arguing that its purpose is to prevent the flow of black money into elections.

Electoral Bonds

- An electoral bond is like a promissory note that can be bought by any Indian citizen or company incorporated in India from **select branches of State Bank of India**.
- The citizen or corporate can then donate the same to any eligible political party of his/her choice.
- The bonds are issued in **multiples of Rs 1,000, Rs 10,000, Rs 100,000 and Rs 1 crore (the range of a bond is between Rs 1,000 to Rs 1 crore)**.
- These will be available at some branches of SBI.
- A donor with a KYC-compliant account can purchase the bonds and can then donate them to the party or individual of their choice.
- Now, the receiver can encash the bonds through the party's verified account.
- The electoral bond will be **valid only for fifteen days**.

Electoral bonds: Conditions

- Any party that is registered under **section 29A of the Representation of the Peoples Act, 1951 (43 of 1951)** and has secured at least one per cent of the votes polled in the most recent General elections or Assembly elections is eligible to receive electoral bonds.
- The party will be allotted a verified account by the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the electoral bond transactions can be made only through this account.
- The electoral bonds **will not bear the name of the donor**. Thus, the political party might not be aware of the donor's identity.

Concerns:

Role of money: Money is the most effective way of buying policy, of engaging in regulatory capture, and of skewing the playing field in one's own favour.

- If a democracy is to thrive, the role of money in influencing politics ought to be limited.
- The entire purpose of democracy, which as B.R. Ambedkar memorably pointed out, was not just to guarantee one person, one vote, but one vote one value.

Arbitrariness and non-transparency:

- The scheme conceals the identity of the donors and donees as well as the amount of donation.
- The scheme facilitates undisclosed quid pro quo arrangements between donors, who are likely to be corporates, and political parties.
- The Election Commission argued the case for “declaration of donation received by political parties and also about the manner in which those funds are expended by them, for better transparency and accountability in the election process”.

Black money:

- A company is not required to name the political parties to which such contributions are made. The donors' name is also not revealed to the public.
- It will result in opaqueness, heighten the odds of conflict of interest and also drastically increase black money and corruption.
- It will also lead to the **creation of shell companies and rise of benami transactions** to channelize the undocumented money into the political and electoral process in India.
- **Foreign donations:** As the electoral bonds scheme allows even foreign donations to political parties (which can often be made through shell companies) the prospects of institutional corruption (including by foreign sources) increases with the electoral bonds scheme, instead of decreasing.

Against right to freedom of speech: In *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India* (2003), the Supreme Court held that the freedom of speech and expression also contained the fundamental right of a voter to secure information about the candidates who are contesting the election.

- When the voter is permitted to know if an electoral candidate is facing any cases, she should be equally entitled to know who is financing the expenses of the party and its candidate.

Privacy: Since the donations are routed through the State Bank of India, it is possible for the government to find out who is donating to which party, but not for the political opposition to know.

The judiciary needs to act

- One of the most critical functions of an independent judiciary in a functioning democracy is to referee the fundamentals of the democratic process.
- The electoral legitimacy of the government is questionable if the electoral process has become questionable. The courts remain the only independent body that can adequately umpire and enforce the ground rules of democracy.
- The petition challenging the constitutional validity of the electoral bonds scheme was filed in 2018. The case, which is absolutely vital to the future health of Indian democracy, has been left unheard for three years.

The Court must conclusively settle the questions around the constitutionality of electoral bonds.

Construction workers: To avoid welfare fund misuse, states told to use DBT, halt in-kind benefit

Recently, the Ministry of Labour & Employment has issued an advisory to all States/UTs to use the Cess Fund for Welfare of Construction Workers.

- After the imposition of the lockdown to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, an advisory was issued by the Labour Ministry to all states/UTs to provide financial assistance to BOC workers via direct benefit transfer (DBT) from the BOCW Welfare Fund maintained by them.
- Most state governments gave out grants between Rs 1,000 and 5,000 per month to registered BOC workers.

Key points:

- The Directorate General Labour Welfare under the Ministry of Labour and Employment has issued directions to all states to not provide any in-kind benefit and give any monetary assistance to workers **only through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)**.
- The Central Building and Other Construction Workers' Advisory Board, an arm of the Union Labour Ministry, flagged multiple cases of '**misuse**' of money from the **Building and Other Construction Workers' (BOCW) Welfare Fund**.

Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act, 1996

- The Act regulates the employment and conditions of service of building and other construction workers.
- It provides for their safety, health and welfare measures and for other matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.
- **The BOCW Act** stipulates that the Welfare Board provide
 - ✓ immediate assistance to a beneficiary in case of an accident,
 - ✓ make payment of pension to the beneficiaries who have completed the age of 60 years,
 - ✓ sanction loans and advances to a beneficiary for construction of a house,
 - ✓ pay amount in connection with premia for group insurance scheme of the beneficiaries and
 - ✓ financial assistance for the education of children of the beneficiaries,
 - ✓ medical expenses and maternity benefit to the female beneficiaries.

Cess Fund for Welfare of Construction Workers

- The **BOCW Cess Act, 1996**, provides for the levy and collection of **cess at 1-2 per cent** of the cost of construction, as the Central government may notify.
- The cess has been levied at the rate of **1 percent of the cost of construction**, as notified by the Central government in its official gazette.
- The cess is **collected by the State governments and UTs** and utilised for the welfare of building and other construction workers by the respective State Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Boards.

Move health to Concurrent list

As per Fifteenth Finance Commission Chairman N.K. Singh, health should be shifted to the Concurrent list under the Constitution, and a developmental finance institution (DFI) dedicated to healthcare investments needs to be set up., said.

Key points:

- **Bringing health into the Concurrent list** would give the Centre greater flexibility to enact regulatory changes and reinforce the obligation of all stakeholders towards providing better healthcare.
- **Government spending on health** should be enhanced to **2.5% of GDP by 2025**.
 - ✓ Primary healthcare should be a fundamental commitment of all States in particular and should be allocated at least two-thirds of such spending.
- **Need for DFI:** The health sector was in dire need of a **DFI similar** to the one being set up to stimulate infrastructure investments.
 - ✓ Such a DFI would increase healthcare access in **tier-2 and tier-3 cities** and also come in with technical assistance that ensures proper usage of funds.
- **Importance of universalising healthcare insurance** as a large section of the society still remained uncovered.
 - ✓ While the PMJAY covers the bottom two income quintiles, commercial insurance largely covers top-income quintile, thereby creating a **'missing middle' class in between**.
 - ✓ **Missing middle class:** This refers to people in the middle two income quintiles, where the population is not rich enough to afford commercial insurance and not poor enough to be covered under government-sponsored health insurance schemes.

Indian Constitution provides for three lists for distribution of legislative and executive power between the Center and the States; i.e.

1. the Union (Central) List,
2. the State List, and
3. the Concurrent List (subjects within the ambit of the Union Government & the State Governments).

The Seventh Schedule of the Constitution divides the subjects on which the Centre and states can make laws under the Union, State and Concurrent lists.

- **Article 246** deals with the 7th Schedule of the Indian Constitution that mentions three lists named as Union List, State List and Concurrent List which specify the divisions of power between Union and States.
- **The Union list** contains 97 items which comprise of the subjects having national significance.
 - ✓ This list admits uniform laws that are applicable over the entire Indian territory, and only the Indian Parliament is capable of legislating upon them.
- **The State list** contains 66 items that comprise subjects relating to local interest or the interest of the State.
 - ✓ The State legislature is thus competent in legislating over these subjects.
- **Concurrent list:** This list enshrines 47 items, with respect to which; both the Union Parliament and the State legislature hold a concurrent legislative power.

Supreme Court for posting retired judges to clear backlog in High Courts

The Supreme Court pushed for the appointment of retired judges to battle the pendency of cases in High Courts.

- **Pendency of cases:** There are over three crore cases pending across the Supreme Court, the High Courts, and the subordinate courts (including district courts).
- Of these, the subordinate courts account for over 86% pendency of cases, followed by 13.8% pendency before the 24 High Courts. The remaining 0.2% of cases are pending with the Supreme Court.

Ad Hoc judges

- The appointment of ad-hoc judges was provided for in the Constitution under **Article 224A (appointment of retired judges at sittings of High Courts)**.
- Under the Article, the Chief Justice of a High Court for any State may at any time, with the previous consent of the President, request any person who has held the office of judge of that court or of any other High Court to sit and act as a judge of the High Court for that State.

Key suggestions:

- **Selection criteria:** Retired judges could be chosen on the basis of their expertise in a particular field of dispute and allowed to retire once the pendency in that zone of law was over.
 - ✓ Retired judges who had handled certain disputes and fields of law for over 15 years could deal with them faster if brought back into harness as ad-hoc judges.
- **Seniority order:** The court said the appointment of ad-hoc judges would not be a threat to the services of other judges. Ad-hoc judges will be treated as the junior most.
- If in a particular jurisdiction, the pendency goes beyond a certain limit, say eight or 10 years, the Chief Justice may appoint a certain [retired] judge with expertise in those fields of laws as an ad hoc judge.

The term of such a judge could be extendable.

OCI card holders no longer required to carry old passports for India travel

People of Indian origin and the Indian diaspora having Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) cards are now not required to carry their old, expired passports for travel to India.

Background:

- Earlier **visas of foreign nationals and OCI cards were suspended** as part of the new international travel restrictions following the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Last year, the central government had allowed certain categories of OCI card holders, who were stranded abroad, to come to the country.
- OCI cardholders were asked to carry their old passport with them to fly to India.

New provisions

- Now, under the new provisions, OCI cardholders are not required to carry their old passports but will still need to carry their new passport.
- However, carrying a new passport is mandatory.
- The timeline for re-issuance of OCI cards who may be required to get their OCI card reissued has been extended until 31 December, 2021.

The Overseas Citizens of India (OCI card)

- The MHA defines an OCI as a person who was a citizen of India on or after January 26, 1950; or was eligible to become a citizen of India on that date; or who is a child or grandchild of such a person, among other eligibility criteria.
- According to Section 7A of the OCI card rules, an applicant is not eligible for the OCI card if he, his parents or grandparents have ever been a citizen of Pakistan or Bangladesh.

Benefits

- The OCI card gives them a visa free travel to India.
- The OCI card, among other benefits, allows multiple entry, multi-purpose life long visa to an Indian-origin foreign national to visit India.
- Under the provisions of the OCI card, which gives the cardholder lifelong visa to India, those below 20 years and above 50 years need to renew their OCI card every time they have their passport renewed.

Limitations:

- OCI cardholders do not get the right to vote, cannot hold government service and buy agricultural land.

Still no recognition of the third tier

There are some lacunas in the recommendations of the Fifteenth Finance Commission with regard to local governments.

About the Finance Commission

- The Finance Commission is a **Constitutional body** that is at the centre of fiscal federalism.
- Set up under **Article 280** of the Constitution, its core responsibility is to evaluate the state of finances of the Union and State Governments, recommend the sharing of taxes between them, lay down the principles determining the distribution of these taxes among States.
- The Finance Commission has to be reconstituted every five years. The Constitution doesn't talk about whether it should be continuous or not continuous.

- It is a **quasi judicial body**.
- Its recommendations are **advisory** in nature.

The 15th Finance Commission: The interim report of the 15th Finance Commission (FC) under chairmanship of N.K. Singh has been tabled in Parliament this budget session.

The 15th Finance commission makes recommendations for the period of 2020-2025 (5 years).

Significance of local bodies and Finance Commission

- The primary task of the Union Finance Commission is to rectify the vertical and horizontal imbalances in resources and expenditure responsibilities between Union and States.
- **Local bodies:**
 - ✓ The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments includes the third tier of local governments.
 - ✓ **Part IX and Part IX-A to the Constitution** mandates the Union Finance Commission to supplement the resources of panchayats and municipalities on the basis of the recommendations of the State Finance Commission (another institution created by the Amendments).
- Now, nearly 2.5 lakh local governments and over 3.4 million elected representatives form the real democratic base of the Indian federal polity.
- COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the significance of local governments, **gram sabha** and other participatory institutions in containing the crisis and delivering social protection in India.

Recommendations of Fifteenth Finance Commission

- **Higher vertical devolution:** From a measly share of 0.78% of the divisible pool with an absolute sum of ₹10,000 crore by the Eleventh Commission, the Fifteenth Finance Commission raised it to 4.23% with a reasonably estimated amount of ₹4,36,361 crore.
- Compared with the Fourteenth Finance Commission there is a 52% increase in the vertical share.
- **Continuity and change** should be the feature of a transfer system, which is designed to build a viable third tier to Indian democracy.
 - ✓ All the Commissions since the Eleventh Commission have tied specific items of expenditure to local grants.

Issues:

- The Fifteenth Finance Commission has specific items of expenditure to 60% and linked them to drinking water, rainwater harvesting, sanitation and other national priorities in the spirit of cooperative federalism.
- However, it **reduced the performance-based grant** to just ₹8,000 crore and that too for building new cities. It left out the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) altogether.
 - ✓ **The performance-linked grants** introduced by the Thirteenth Finance Commission earmarked 35% of local grants specifying six conditions for panchayats and nine for urban local governments.
 - ✓ It covered a **wide range of reforms:** from the establishment of an independent ombudsman to notifying standards for service sectors such as drinking water and solid waste management.
 - ✓ Municipalities are additionally required to publish service level benchmarks for basic services.

- **Entry-level criterion**

- ✓ An important recommendation of the Fifteenth Finance Commission is the **entry-level criterion to avail the union local grant** (except health grant) by local governments (strictly speaking, it is performance-linked).
- ✓ **For panchayats**, the condition is online submission of annual accounts for the previous year and audited accounts for the year before.
- ✓ **For urban local governments**, two more conditions are specified: after 2021-22, fixation of minimum floor for property tax rates by the relevant State followed by consistent improvement in the collection of property taxes in tandem with the State's own Gross State Domestic Product.
- ✓ It is not clear why gram panchayats are left out from this.

- **Lack of data:**

- ✓ Unlike the previous Commissions, the Fourteenth Finance Commission conducted a sample survey covering 15% gram panchayats, 30% block panchayats and all district panchayats besides 30% municipalities, presumably to ensure quality in canvassing data.
- ✓ Without reliable data we cannot ensure good governance.
- ✓ **Articles 243G, 243W and 243ZD** demand better public services and delivery of 'economic development and social justice' at the local level.

- **Equalisation principle**

- ✓ The **Alma-Ata declaration of the World Health Organization** (1978) outlined an integrated, local government-centric approach with simultaneous focus on access to water, sanitation, shelter and the like.
- ✓ **No integrated approach:** Although the Fifteenth Finance Commission outlines nine guiding principles as the basis of its recommendation to local governments, there is no integrated approach.
- ✓ **The criteria used** by the Fifteenth Finance Commission for determining the distribution of grant to States for local governments, it employed **population (2011 Census) with 90% and area 10% weightage**.
- ✓ While this ensures continuity, equity and efficiency criteria are sidelined. Abandoning tax effort criterion incentivises dependency, inefficiency and non-accountability.

In sum, if decentralisation is meant to empower local people, the primary task is to fiscally empower local governments to deliver territorial equity.

A missing science pillar in the COVID response

After reporting a significant drop in the number of Covid-19 cases for months, some Indian states have seen a sharp increase in infections in February.

- The epidemiology of COVID-19 is poorly understood, but some early understanding of the transmission of the virus can enable a more effective science-driven response.

Reasons behind rise in cases

- **Spread of variants:** The surge is probably driven by variants from the original, as variants worldwide comprise much of the current wave.

- ✓ Anecdotal reports that the current surge is occurring more in younger adults and accompanied by unusual symptoms. Direct evidence is needed from genetic sequencing of the virus.
- ✓ The patterns of infection in India clearly suggest multi-generational transmission, with younger adults the engine of transmission into the elderly.
- ✓ As well, much of infection in India might well be mild, with less durable immune protection than induced by vaccination.

Way forward:

- **Data driven steps:** India needs to increase the quantity, quality and public availability of actual data to guide decision-making.
- **Sequencing of the viral genome** is needed from many parts of India, which can be achieved by re-programming sequencing capacity in Indian academic and commercial laboratories.
- **Far better reporting of COVID-19 deaths** is needed. Daily or weekly reporting of the total death counts by age and sex by each municipality would help track if there is a spike in presumed COVID-19 deaths.
 - ✓ **The Registrar General of India's verbal autopsy studies** are invaluable, but must be reactivated to review deaths occurring in 2020, given that the last available results are from 2013.
- **Collection of anonymised demographic and risk details** (age, sex, travel, contact with other COVID-19 patients, existing chronic conditions, current smoking) on all positive cases on a central website in each State remains a priority.
- **Serial surveys:** The Indian Council of Medical Research's national serosurvey had design limitations such that it probably underestimated the true national prevalence. A far larger and better set of serial surveys is required.
- **Research:** we need to understand better why some populations are not affected. For example, COVID-19 infection and death levels in Thailand and Vietnam are remarkably low.
 - ✓ Rapidly assembled comparative studies across parts of India and Asia are a priority.
- **Countering inequity**
 - ✓ Vaccination campaigns need to reach the poor adults over age 45, without having to prove anything other than approximate age.
 - ✓ Similarly, India must capture and report data on who is vaccinated, including by education or wealth levels.
- **Adult vaccination plan**
 - ✓ COVID-19 could well turn into a seasonal challenge and thus, the central government should actively consider launching a national adult vaccination programme like universal childhood vaccination.
 - ✓ The Disease Control Priorities Project estimates an adult national programme would cost about ₹250 per Indian per year to cover routine annual flu vaccination, five-yearly pneumococcal vaccines, and HPV vaccines for adolescent girls and tetanus for expectant mothers.
 - ✓ Adult and child vaccination programmes are essential to prepare for future pandemics.
- **Avoiding lockdowns:** More draconian steps, such as another full national lockdown should be considered carefully, as they incur a huge toll on the poor and stunt education of Indian children.

The resurgence of COVID-19 presents a major challenge for governments, yet the best hope is to rapidly expand epidemiological evidence, share it with the public and build confidence that the vaccination programme will benefit all Indians.

EC slaps 48-hour campaign ban

The Election Commission of India (ECI) debarred DMK deputy general secretary from campaigning for 48 hours with immediate effect. It also reprimanded him for violation of the Model Code of Conduct for making certain remarks against Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Edappadi.

Key points:

- Following a complaint from the AIADMK, the ECI had issued a notice to Mr. Raja.
- It also delisted Mr. Raja's name from the list of star campaigners of the DMK.
- Mr. Raja's interim reply to the notice issued by the Commission "was not found satisfactory".
- The Commission urged him to be watchful and not to make intemperate, indecent, derogatory, obscene remarks and lower the dignity of women in future during the election campaign.

Model code of conduct

- The Model Code of Conduct consists of a **set of guidelines** expected to be abiding by the political parties, their campaigners and the candidates.
- **Objective:** The Election Commission brings the Model Code of Conduct into effect to **ensure free and fair elections**.
- **Duration:** The Model Code of Conduct remains in place during the elections in respect of political parties and candidates which remains in force **from the date the elections are announced by the Commission till the completion of elections**.
- It is clarified that the provisions of MCC and related instructions of the Commission issued from time to time shall also **apply to the content being posted on the internet, including social media websites, by candidates and political parties.**
- Here are some key highlights of the guidelines:

Model Code of Conduct guidelines on General Conduct

- No party or candidate shall include in any activity which may aggravate existing differences or create mutual hatred or cause tension between different castes and communities, religious or linguistic.
- Criticism of other political parties, when made, shall be confined to their policies and programme, past record and work. Parties and Candidates shall refrain from criticism of all aspects of private life.
- Criticism of other parties or their workers based on unverified allegations or distortion shall be avoided.
- There shall be no appeal to caste or communal feelings for securing votes. Mosques, Churches, Temples or other places of worship shall not be used as a forum for election propaganda.
- All parties and candidates shall avoid scrupulously all activities which are "corrupt practices" and offences under the election law, such as bribing of voters, intimidation of voters, impersonation of voters, canvassing within 100 meters of polling stations, holding public meetings during the period of 48 hours ending with the hour fixed for the close of the poll, and the transport and conveyance of voters to and from the polling station.
- No political party or candidate shall permit its or his followers to make use of any individual's land, building, compound wall etc., without his permission for erecting flag-staffs, suspending banners, pasting notices, writing slogans etc.
- Political parties and candidates shall ensure that their supporters do not create obstructions in or break up meetings and processions organized by other parties.

Punitive actions:

- **No judicial enforcement:** Though the ECI does not have a judicial ability to penalise the violators of the Model Code of Conduct, it generally issues show-cause notice to the violators and in some cases, bars them from the poll campaign.

Star campaigner

A star campaigner is a celebrity vote seeker in an election for a party. This person can be a politician or even a film star. There is no law governing who can or cannot be made a star campaigner.

- They are nominated by the concerned political parties specifying their constituencies and duration of the status.
- A **'recognised' party** declared as such by the Election Commission -- can nominate a maximum of 40 star campaigners.
- An **unrecognised political party** can nominate a maximum of 20 star campaigners.
- **Expenditure incurred on electioneering by the star campaigner is not added** to a candidate's poll expenditure giving him/her more leeway.
 - ✓ According to the Representation of People's Act, these expenses will be borne by the political parties.
- For an individual candidate to get relief from campaign expenditure, the star campaigner has to **limit oneself to general campaigning for the party.**

Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991

The Supreme Court sought the Centre's response on a PIL challenging the Constitutional validity of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991.

- The Act prohibits the conversion of a temple into a mosque and vice versa.
- In agreeing to examine the law, the court has opened the doors for litigation in various places of worship across the country including Mathura and Varanasi.

Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991

- It mandates that the nature of all places of worship, except the one in Ayodhya that was then under litigation, shall be maintained as it was on **August 15, 1947**, and that no encroachment of any such place prior to the date can be challenged in courts.
- **Aims:** It seeks to "prohibit conversion of any place of worship and to provide for the maintenance of the religious character of any place of worship as it existed on the 15th day of August, 1947, and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto".
- **Section 3** of the Act, bans the conversion of a place of worship or even a section of it "into a place of worship of a different religious denomination or of a different segment of the same religious denomination".
- **Section 6** mandates a three-year "imprisonment and a fine for contravening the provisions of Section 3".

- **Exemption:** However, the Places of Worship Act **does not apply to the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute and to “any suit, appeal or proceeding relating to it”.**

An instrument to preserve secularism

- The Supreme Court observed the Places of Worship Act embodies the secular values of the Indian Constitution and strictly prohibits retrogression.
- **Non-retrogression is a foundational feature** of the fundamental constitutional principles of which secularism is a core component.

Petition Arguments:

- The concepts of faith, belief and worship are the foundations of **Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution of India.**
- The petition says that the law **bars the remedy of judicial review which is a basic feature of the Constitution**, thereby depriving Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains the right to move court to get their places of worship, destroyed or encroached upon by “barbarian invaders”, restored.
- The law bars the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and furthermore nullifies the Fundamental Right(s) guaranteed by the Constitution of India as elucidated in **Article 32 of “enforcement of fundamental rights”** which cannot be suspended except as otherwise stated in the Constitution.
- Under **Article 32** of the Constitution of India, the Supreme Court has the power to issue writs appropriate for enforcement of all the Fundamental rights conferred by Part III of the Constitution.
- The power of judicial review is an integral part of the basic structure of the Constitution, no Act of Parliament can exclude or curtail the powers of the Constitutional Courts with regard to the enforcement of fundamental rights.
- The Act of 1991, is appropriately called an **Act of colourable legislation**. You cannot do indirectly which you are prohibited from doing directly.
- **Ismail Faruqui vs. Union of India** had held that a mosque was not an “essential part of the practice of the religion of Islam” and that namaz could be offered anywhere and hence, “its acquisition (by the state) is not prohibited by the provisions in the Constitution of India”.
- **Penalty: Section 6 of the Act** prescribes a punishment of **maximum three-years imprisonment** along with a fine for contravening the provisions of the Act.
- It is argued that the Centre has no power to legislate on “**pilgrimages**” or “**burial grounds**” which is under the state list.
 - ✓ However, the government had said it could make use of its **residuary power** under Entry 97 of the Union List to enact this law.
 - ✓ **Entry 97** confers residuary powers to the Centre to legislate on subjects that are **not enumerated in any of the three lists.**
- **Supreme Court’s View (in 2019):** In the **2019 Ayodhya verdict**, the Constitution Bench referred to the law and said it manifests the secular values of the Constitution and strictly prohibits retrogression.

In case of scrapping of the law, there might be numerous litigations for rebuilding all 40,000 temples which were demolished in the medieval period.

Grants for Local Bodies

The Department of Expenditure, Ministry of Finance released an amount of Rs. 4,608 crore to States for providing grant-in-aid to the local bodies.

- The grants are both for the Rural Local Bodies (RLBs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs).
- The grants have been released as per the recommendations of the 15th Finance Commission.

Background:

- The Finance Commission has granted Rs 4,36,361 crore from the central divisible tax pool to local governments, both rural and urban, for 2021-26.
- Local governments like the village panchayat and urban municipality are the third-tier in the Indian governance system, the first being the central government and the second the state.
- The RLB grants are meant for **all the tiers in the panchayat – village, block and district as well as for 5th and 6th Schedule areas in the States.**
- The rural bodies implement around 70 per cent of India's rural development programmes with an annual budget over Rs 2 lakh crore.
- Of the total grant, Rs 236,805 crore is for rural bodies for local governments (Panchayat institutions) while urban bodies (municipal corporations, municipalities, etc) get Rs 121,055 crore.
- An additional Rs 70,051 crore is earmarked as health grants for such local governments.
- Under the 14th FC, grants for local bodies included only the village Panchayat, excluding the block and district panchayats.
- The 15thFC has included all levels of rural panchayats and also the panchayats in scheduled areas as mentioned above, besides cantonment boards.

Kinds of grants

- RLB grants are partly **basic/untied and partly tied** in nature.
- The basic grants can be used by RLBs for location-specific felt needs.
- The tied grants can only be used for the basic services of
 - ✓ sanitation and maintenance of open-defecation free (ODF) status and
 - ✓ supply of drinking water, rain water harvesting and water recycling.
- ULB grants have been provided in two categories
 - ✓ grants for Million Plus cities and
 - ✓ grants for Non-Million Plus cities
- Entire grant to **Million Plus cities** is tied in nature.
 - ✓ To receive these grants, the Million Plus cities are required to develop city-wise and areas-wise targets on ambient air quality based on annual average concentrations of PM 10 and PM 2.5.
 - ✓ The **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change** (MOEF&CC) will monitor and evaluate the improvement and recommend disbursement of grants to such cities.
 - ✓ Grants to Million Plus cities have also been linked for improving conservation, supply and management of water and efficient solid waste management, which are critical for planned urbanisation.
 - ✓ **Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs** is the nodal Ministry.
 - ✓ **Water supply and solid waste management** related component of the grant is to be spent exclusively for improving water and solid waste management and achieving star ratings by ULBs.
- **In case of non Million-Plus cities**, 50% of this is basic grant while the rest 50% is tied to (a) drinking water (including rainwater harvesting and recycling) and (b) solid waste management.
 - ✓ This amount is in addition to the funds provided under various Centrally Sponsored Schemes like Swachh Bharat Mission, Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) etc.

SC frowns on interim heads for CBI

The Supreme Court told the government that interim appointments to the post of CBI Director cannot go on.

Background:

- A petition filed by Common Cause objected to the appointment of Praveen Sinha as interim CBI Director following the retirement of CBI Director.
- The petition said the government had failed to appoint a regular Director through the high-power selection committee of the Prime Minister, Chief Justice of India and Leader of Opposition.

Key points:

- The Common Cause has argued that an interim appointment through an executive order was not **envisaged in the statutory scheme of the 1946 Act**.
- **Functional autonomy:** The CBI Director is a sensitive post. The premier investigative agency should function independently outside the pale of the Executive or political powers.
- There should be a **limit to the extent of executive discretion** in the matter of appointment of this key functionary.
- It also urged the court to direct the **introduction of a mechanism** to ensure that the process of selection of CBI Director is completed one or two months in advance of the retirement of the incumbent.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)

- It owes its origin to the Special Police Establishment (SPE), which was established by the colonial government in 1941 through an executive order to deal with corruption involving war-time purchases and supplies.
- In 1946, the then government enacted the **Delhi Special Police Establishment Act** to give the organisation a statutory cover.
- Later, based on the recommendations of the **Santhanam Committee on Prevention of Corruption**, CBI was established by a resolution of the **Ministry of Home Affairs**.
- Later, it was **transferred to the Ministry of Personnel**.
- The **CBI is not a statutory body**. It derives its powers from the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, 1946.
- The CBI is the main investigating agency of the Central Government.
- It works under the overall superintendence of Central Vigilance Commission in matters related to the **Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988**.

Appointment of CBI Director

- The Director of CBI has been provided **security of two-year tenure** in office by the CVC Act, 2003 (**Vineet Narain Case**).
- The **Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act (2013)** amended the **Delhi Special Police Establishment Act (1946)** and made the following changes with respect to appointment of the Director of CBI:
- According to the said section, a CBI director shall be appointed by the central government on the recommendation of a committee consisting of:
 - ✓ **The Prime Minister as its chairperson;**
 - ✓ **The Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha/leader of the single largest opposition party in Lok Sabha; and**
 - ✓ **The Chief Justice of India or a judge of the Supreme Court nominated by the CJI — the latter two as committee members.**

- Further, the committee is required to recommend a panel of officers on the basis of seniority, integrity and experience in the investigation of anti-corruption cases, chosen from amongst officers belonging to the Indian Police Service constituted under the All-India Services Act, for being considered for appointment as CBI Director.

Guidelines by Central Vigilance Commission

Context- The Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) has modified the guidelines pertaining to the transfer and posting of its officials in the vigilance units of government organisations, restricting their tenure to three years at one place. The tenure may be extended to three more years, albeit at a different place of posting.

Background

- The CVC, in its order has mentioned undue long stay of an official in a vigilance department has the potential of developing vested interests, apart from giving rise to unnecessary complaints or allegations.
- The move has been made in order to emphasize the importance of the issue and to ensure transparency, objectivity and uniformity in approach of the Commission.
- As per the modification, the personnel can have two continuous postings in vigilance units but at different places of posting and each posting can be for a maximum period of three years.
- Personnel who have been working for **over three years at one place should be transferred in phases**, with priority given to those who have served for the maximum period. Those having completed over five years at one place should be shifted on top priority basis.
- As per the Commission the move will be implemented in phases. The first phase of transfer/posting has to be completed by **May 31, 2021** and the entire exercise of transferring all the personnel in question should be completed by June 30.
- As per the order by the Commission, after the transfer from the vigilance unit, there would be a compulsory cooling off period of three years for the concerned personnel before they could be considered again for posting in the unit.
- Personnel, who have completed three years in the vigilance unit of an organisation, could be considered for transfer on deputation basis in the unit of another organisation, subject to the laid down rules.

Central Vigilance Commission

About CVC

- The Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) is the apex vigilance institution in India that is free of control from any executive authority, monitors all vigilance activity under the Central Government and advises various authorities in Central Government organizations in planning, executing, reviewing and reforming their vigilance work.
- Vigilance- A process to ensure clean and prompt administrative action to achieve efficiency and effectiveness of the employees in particular and the organization in general, as lack of Vigilance can lead to waste, losses and economic decline.
- The CVC was established by the Government in 1964. This was done on the basis of the recommendations of the **Committee on Prevention of Corruption, headed by Shri K. Santhanam**. In 2003, the Parliament enacted the **CVC Act to confer statutory status on the CVC**.

- It is not controlled by any Ministry/Department of the government and It is an independent body responsible only to the Parliament of India.

Functions of CVC

- It receives complaints on corruption or to misuse of office and recommends appropriate actions. the institutions, bodies or persons who can approach the CVC include:
- **Central Government**
- **Lokpal**
- **Whistle Blowers**
- Since it is not an investigating agency, it gets the investigation done either through the CBI or through the **Chief Vigilance Officers (CVO)** in the government offices.
- It has the power to inquire into offences that are alleged to have been committed under the **Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), 1988** by certain categories of public servants.
- It presents an annual report that gives the details of the work done by the commission and points to systemic failures which lead to corruption in government departments. The report also suggests Improvements and preventive measures.

Composition

- The CVC consists of a central vigilance commissioner and not more than two other vigilance commissioners.

Appointment

- These members are appointed by the President of India on the recommendations of a committee that consists of the Prime Minister, Union Home Minister and **Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in Lok Sabha** (if there is no LoP in the Lok Sabha, then the leader of the single largest Opposition party in the Lok Sabha is a part of the Committee).

Term

- The term of the Chief Vigilance Officer and other vigilance officers is 4 years or 65 years, whichever is earlier.

Removal

- The Central Vigilance Commissioner or any Vigilance Commissioner **can be removed from his office only by an order of the President of India on grounds of proved misbehavior or incapacity** after the Supreme Court, on a reference made to it by the President, has, on inquiry, reported that the Central Vigilance Commissioner or any Vigilance Commissioner, as the case may be, ought to be removed.

Governance of CVC

- The CVC has its own Secretariat, a **Chief Technical Examiners' Wing (CTE)** and a wing of **Commissioners for Departmental Inquiries (CDI)**.
- For the purposes of investigation, the CVC depends on **two external sources** – the **CBI** and the **Chief Vigilance Officers (CVO)**.
- The Secretariat of the CVC consists of 4 Additional Secretaries, 30 Directors/Deputy Secretaries (including two Officers on Special Duty), 4 Under Secretaries and other office staff.

- The **Chief Technical Examiner's Organisation** acts as the technical wing of the Central Vigilance Commission and consists of 2 Engineers of the rank of Chief Engineers who are designated as Chief Technical Examiners; with other supporting engineering staff.

Jurisdiction of CVC

The jurisdiction of the CVC is defined under the following acts:

1. **CVC Act 2003- the CVC is** empowered to investigate cases related to:
 - **Members of All India Service** serving in connection with the affairs of the Union and Group A officers of the Central Government
 - Officers of the rank of Scale V and above in the Public Sector Banks
 - **Officers of Grade D and above** in Reserve Bank of India (RBI), NABARD and SIDBI
 - Chief Executives and Executives on the Board and other officers of E-8 and above in Schedule 'A' and 'B' Public Sector Undertakings
 - Chief Executives and Executives on the Board and other officers of E-7 and above in Schedule 'C' and 'D' Public Sector Undertakings
 - Managers and above in General Insurance Companies
 - Senior Divisional Managers and above in Life Insurance Corporations
 - Officers who draw a salary of Rs.8700/- per month and above on Central Government D.A. (**Dearness Allowance**) pattern, as on the date of the notification and as **may be revised from time to time in Societies and other Local Authorities.**
2. **The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013**
 - The Act **amends some of the provisions of the CVC Act, 2003** through which the **Commission** has been given **the power to conduct preliminary inquiry** into complaints **referred to it by Lokpal** in respect of officers and officials of Group 'B', 'C' & 'D', besides:
 - **Group 'A' officers**, for whom a **Directorate of Inquiry** for making preliminary inquiry has to be set up in the Commission.
 - **The preliminary inquiry reports** in such matters that are referred to it by Lokpal in respect of Group A and B officers are required to **be sent to the Lokpal by the CVC.**
 - The Commission has also been empowered to cause **further investigation** (after preliminary enquiry) into such matters **referred by Lokpal** in respect of **Group 'C' & 'D'** officials and make a decision on further course of action against them.
3. **The Whistleblowers Protection Act, 2014**
 - **The Whistleblowers Protection Act, 2014-** The Act makes the CVC as the competent authority:
 - ✓ **To receive complaints** related to the **disclosure on any allegation of corruption** or willful misuse of power or willful misuse of discretion against any public servant and to inquire or cause an inquiry into such disclosure,
 - ✓ **To provide adequate safeguards against victimization** of persons who make such complaints and for matters connected therewith and incidental thereto.

Limitations of CVC

- Since it is an **advisory body** it is often called a powerless agency with limited powers of its own.
- **Multiplicity of organizations** often leads to duplicity of work and reduces effectiveness of the organisation.
- Although it is a relatively independent organisation, it has **neither the resources nor powers to take actions on complaints of corruption.**
- The **huge delay in investigation** of CVC cases acts as an effective deterrent.

Conclusion

In recent years, India has emerged as one of the progressive and vibrant economies. The rapid growth in almost all sectors of the economy and huge investments being made in the country's infrastructure and other sectors throws up CVCs' challenges in the fight against the menace of corruption.

Therefore, there is greater need in such times to address the shortcomings in the system of CVC and enhance its efficiency as an organisation dealing with corruption.

SC rejects petition against any move to deport Rohingya detained in Jammu

The Supreme Court rejected a prayer against possible deportation of members of the Rohingya community detained in Jammu.

Background:

- A Rohingya petitioner had sought release of the people from his community detained in Jammu and Kashmir and a direction to the Centre not to deport them to Myanmar.
- He contended that they will be subjected to genocide if sent back.

Petitioner's arguments:

- **Rights under Articles 14 and 21** are available to all persons who may or may not be citizens.
- **The principle of NON-Refoulement** is part of the right guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution. The Rohingya were persecuted in Myanmar.
 - ✓ Under international human rights law, **the principle of non-refoulement** guarantees that no one should be re- turned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm.

Govt.'s stand:

- The Centre in its reply had made "two serious allegations", which "relate to
 - ✓ (i) the threat to internal security of the country; and
 - ✓ (ii) the agents and touts provide a safe passage into India for illegal immigrants, due to the porous nature of the landed borders.
- **India is not a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees 1951 or to the 1967 Protocol** relating to the Status of Refugees and "that the principle of non-refoulement is applicable only to contracting States.
 - ✓ The **1951 Refugee Convention** is a UN treaty that defines who a **refugee** is and establishes the rights of such persons and also of those who are granted **asylum**.
 - ✓ It also talks about the responsibilities and legal obligations of countries that grant **asylum** status to people.
 - ✓ The process began under the League of **Nations** in 1921.
 - ✓ In July **1951**, a diplomatic **conference** in Geneva adopted the **Convention** relating to the **Status of Refugees** ('**1951 Convention**'), which was later amended by the **1967 Protocol**.

- The government will follow the legal procedure before deporting anyone. They are illegal immigrants. We are always in touch with Myanmar and if they confirm, they can be deported.

Supreme Court's observations

- The Rohingya in Jammu shall not be deported unless the procedure prescribed for such deportation is followed.
- The rights guaranteed under **Articles 14 and 21** are available to all persons who may or may not be citizens.
- But the **right not to be deported is associated with the right to reside or settle in any part of the territory of India** guaranteed under **Article 19(1)(e)**.
- According to Article 19(1)(e) every citizen of India has the right "to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India.
- The State may under clause (5) of Article 19 impose reasonable restriction on the freedom of movement on two grounds-
 - ✓ a) In the interests of general public
 - ✓ b) For the protection of the interest of Scheduled Tribes

Fundamental Rights for Citizens only

Under the Indian constitution, certain fundamental rights are available only to the citizens, namely:

- **Right against discrimination** on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15);
- **Right to equality of opportunity** in matter of public employment (Article 16);
- **Freedom of speech and expression**, assembly, association, movement, residence and profession (Article 19);
- **Cultural and educational rights** (Article 29 and 30); and
- **Right to vote** and become members of the union and state legislatures.

Fundamental Rights for Citizens and Foreigners in India

- Article 14 – Equality before the law and equal protection of laws.
- Article 20 – Protection in respect of conviction for offences.
- Article 21 – Protection of life and personal liberty.
- Article 21A – Right to elementary education.
- Article 22 – Protection against arrest and detention in certain cases.
- Article 23 – Prohibition of traffic in human beings and forced labour.
- Article 24 – Prohibition of employment of children in factories etc.
- Article 25 – Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion.
- Article 26 – Freedom to manage religious affairs.
- Article 27 – Freedom from payment of taxes for promotion of any religion.
- Article 28 – Freedom from attending religious instruction or worship in certain educational institutions.

Several offices can also be occupied exclusively by citizens:

- President (Article 58(1)(a))
- Vice-president (Article 66(2))

- Judges of the Supreme Court (Article 124(3)) and high court (Article 217(2)),
- Governor of a state (Article 157),
- Attorney general (Article 76(1)) and Advocate general (Article 165).

The Foreigners Act confers the power to expel foreigners from India. It vests the Central Government with absolute and unfettered discretion.

NITI Aayog to launch Online Dispute Resolution handbook

NITI Aayog has planned to launch a new first-of-its-kind, Online Dispute Resolution (ODR) handbook in India.

- This new handbook will be an invitation to business leaders to adopt ODR in India.
- It highlights the need for such a mechanism, the models of ODR that businesses can adopt and an actionable pathway for them.

Online Dispute Resolution

- ODR is the resolution of disputes outside courts, particularly of small and medium-value cases, using digital technology and techniques of alternate dispute resolution (ADR), such as negotiation, mediation, and arbitration.
- It utilises **information technology** to carry out ADR.
- The information management and communication tools in ODR may apply to all or part of the proceedings and also have an impact on the methods by which the disputes are being solved.
- The **United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL)** adopted the UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial Arbitration in 1985 and the UNCITRAL Conciliation Rules in 1980.

ODR in India

- The new **Arbitration and Conciliation (Amendment) Act, 2019** amended the **Indian Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996**.
- The Arbitration Act provides for **Alternative Dispute Resolution mechanisms** like arbitration, conciliations, etc. for national and international stakeholders.
- The **Legal Services Authorities Act** was passed in 1987 to encourage out-of-court settlements, and the new Arbitration and Conciliation Act was enacted in 1996.

Advantages of ODR

- ODR is a generally **informal, flexible and creative tool of dispute resolution** which is not governed by strict rules of procedure and evidence.
 - ✓ This may allow the parties to design or participate in a process which can be moulded to suit their needs and encourages a consensual rather than an adversarial approach.

- ODR may **reduce litigation costs**: this is of importance both to corporate parties who wish to keep costs down and to parties who otherwise might not be able to afford the cost of litigation.
- ODR may be the appropriate option particularly for **low-cost, high-volume transaction** as it often allows for a timely, cost-efficient and efficient resolution to problems where the amounts in dispute may not be sufficiently high to justify the cost of a meeting-based mediation (e.g. consumer disputes).

While courts are becoming digitized through the efforts of the judiciary, more effective, scalable, and collaborative mechanisms of containment and resolution are urgently needed. ODR can help resolve disputes efficiently and affordably.

United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL)

- The United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) was established as a **subsidiary body of the U.N. General Assembly (UNGA)** in 1966.
- The organization is responsible for helping to **facilitate international trade and investment**.
- The Tribunal constituted in accordance with the **UNCITRAL Arbitration Rules 1976** is seated at the Hague, Netherlands, and proceedings are administered by the **Permanent Court of Arbitration**.

**Sushil Chandra appointed
next Chief Election
Commissioner**

As per the Law Ministry, Sushil Chandra appointed as the next Chief Election Commissioner.

Election commission of India:

- **Article 324 to 329** of the constitution deals with powers, function, tenure, eligibility, etc of the commission and the member.
- **Article 324**: The superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for, and the conduct of, all elections to Parliament and to the Legislature of every State and of elections to the offices of President and Vice-President held under this Constitution shall be vested in a Commission (referred to in this Constitution as the Election Commission).

Composition

- **Article 324(2)**: The Election Commission shall consist of the Chief Election Commissioner and such number of other Election Commissioners, if any, as the President may from time to time fix and the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners shall, subject to the provisions of any law made in that behalf by Parliament, be made by the President.
- **Article 324(3)**: When any other Election Commissioner is so appointed the Chief Election Commissioner shall act as the Chairman of the Election Commission.
- **Article 324(4)**: The President may also appoint after consultation with the Election Commission such **Regional Commissioners** as he may consider necessary to assist the Election Commission in the performance of the functions conferred on the Commission by clause (1).

Tenure:

- The CEC and the Election Commissioners have tenure of six years, or up to the age of 65 years, whichever is earlier, and enjoy the same status and receive salary and perks as available to apex court judges.

Removal:

- **Article 324 (5)** of the Constitution safeguards the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) from arbitrary removal.
- The CEC can be removed from office only by the **order of the President, just like a judge of the Supreme Court.**
- However, the same constitutional provision is **silent about the procedure for removal of the two Election Commissioners.** It only provides that they cannot be removed from office except on the recommendation of the CEC.

Centre fast-track approval for more vaccine candidates

The government has decided to fast track approvals for COVID-19 vaccines that have been developed outside India and have been granted the emergency use authorisation (EUA) by other drug regulatory agencies.

- The decision was taken based on the recommendation made by the National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for COVID-19 (NEGVAC).
- India has already approved three vaccines — **Covishield, Covaxin and Sputnik V** — for restricted use.
- The Subject Expert Committee cleared Sputnik V vaccine on April 12 and the Indian drug regulator's nod came on Tuesday.

Eligibility: The vaccines that would be eligible for the fast-track approval will include those that have been granted an EUA by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), European Medicines Agency (EMA), UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and the Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices Agency (PMDA) of Japan, or those that have been prequalified by the WHO for emergency use.

- ✓ I.e. Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson and Johnson vaccines would be eligible for fast-track approval.

Process of approvals:

- Under the fast-track approval process, the bridging studies will take place in parallel to mass vaccination.
- So far, clinical trials conducted in India were needed before the Indian regulator could approve the vaccine.
- But before mass roll out of the vaccines, the vaccines will be first given to 100 beneficiaries and these individuals will be assessed for seven days for safety outcomes.

Significance:

- It aims to “**expand the basket of vaccines** for domestic use and hasten the pace and coverage”.
- The decision will facilitate **quicker access to such foreign vaccines by India.**

- It would **encourage imports including import of bulk drug material**, optimal utilisation of domestic fill and finish capacity etc., which will in turn provide a fillip to vaccine manufacturing capacity and total vaccine availability for domestic.
- The decision finally complies with the **WHO's recommendation of regulatory reliance**.
 - ✓ The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines regulatory reliance as "The act whereby the regulatory authority in one jurisdiction may give significant weight to evaluations performed by another regulatory authority or trusted institution in reaching its own decision.
 - ✓ The relying authority remains responsible and accountable for decisions taken, even when it relies on the decisions and information of others.

Clinical Trials: A clinical trial is a systematic study to generate data for discovering or verifying the clinical and pharmacological profile or adverse effects of a new drug on humans.

- It is the only way of establishing the safety and efficacy of any drug before its introduction in the market for human use and is preceded by animal trials.

Phases of Clinical Trials: Clinical trials are carried out in four phases. Clinical trials of drugs developed in India have to undergo all four phases of trials in India.

- **Phase I** or clinical pharmacology trials or "first in man" study, where the new drug is administered to a small number.
- **Phase II** or exploratory trials, during which the medicine is administered to a group of approximately 10-12 informed patients to determine its effect and also to check for any unacceptable side effects.
- **Phase III** or confirmatory trials, to obtain sufficient evidence about the efficacy and safety of the drug in a larger number of patients.
- **Phase IV** or post-marketing phase or phase of surveillance after the medicine is made available to doctors, who start prescribing it.

Institutions, caste and the vital cog of trust

The article focuses on whether trust in institutions such as state government, judiciary and police varies by caste. It relies on the India Human Development Survey 2015 (IHDS).

- The India Human Development Survey (IHDS) is a nationally representative, multi-topic panel survey of 41,554 households in 1503 villages and 971 urban neighborhoods across India.

Significance of trust

- **Trust impacts income and growth** through markets and public institutions. There is a positive relationship between trust and the development of financial markets.
 - ✓ **Operation of these markets** is contingent on trustworthiness of debtors, as legal methods of recovery of dues are fraught with delays and heavy expenses.
 - ✓ **In labour markets**, higher trust manifests in 'higher levels of cooperative relations between labour and management and higher levels of unionisation.

- ✓ Firms that have unions representing their employees are better able to adapt to new management methods, and show better productivity.
- ✓ Evidence suggests a strong positive correlation between trust and the quality of the legal system.
- ✓ There is a similar **correlation between trust and the quality of governance**.
- One component of trust is shaped by **beliefs inherited** from earlier generations, and another by a **contemporaneous environment**.

Key findings

- **Trust in public institutions** is measured in terms of levels of confidence:
 - ✓ a great deal of confidence
 - ✓ only some confidence and
 - ✓ hardly any confidence.
- **Caste hierarchy** reflects socio-economic status.
 - ✓ Brahmins are at the top, followed by High Castes, Other Backward Classes/OBCs, and then the deprived including Scheduled Castes/SCs and Scheduled Tribes/STs.
 - ✓ Hence, General combines Brahmins, High Castes and Others, while other castes are as stated.
 - ✓ Although **affirmative action** (e.g., quotas for SCs, STs and OBCs in education and public sector employment) has benefited these groups, segments of SCs and STs are still among the most deprived and vulnerable to poverty.

Key findings: The **most trusted was the judiciary**, followed by State governments and then police.

- A vast majority of households surveyed lacked confidence in State governments in 2012.
- **Judiciary:** A large majority reported a great deal of confidence, a moderate proportion had only some confidence and an extremely small proportion had hardly any confidence.
 - ✓ These findings are indeed surprising given the judicial overload of cases and prolonged delays.
- **The police:** A low proportion had a great deal of confidence in it, a majority had only some confidence and a more than moderate proportion had hardly any confidence.
- **In the composite caste category, General**, the highest proportion (under half) had only some confidence, under 30% had a great deal of confidence while about a quarter had hardly any confidence.
- **A high proportion of OBCs** also reported a great deal of confidence, a much higher proportion displayed a great deal of confidence and a much lower proportion had hardly any confidence.
- **Among SCs**, the highest proportion (under 45%) displayed a great deal of confidence, a smaller proportion had only some confidence, and a much smaller proportion with hardly any confidence.
- STs, however, display a pattern not dissimilar to OBCs.

Quota as a reason behind trust of SCs

- SCs display much confidence in State governments. One reason is quotas.
- SCs are largely reliant on state munificence.
- STs while also dependent on quotas, are so isolated that they have limited experience of social safety nets.
- Over 30% displayed hardly any confidence, with the highest among SCs and STs. This is not surprising given rampant corruption and discrimination against lower castes.

Need for inclusion

- There is a sharp erosion of trust because of
 - ✓ State government policies that are not inclusive,
 - ✓ judicial verdicts that do not conform to high standards of autonomy and fairness, and
 - ✓ police actions that violate rights of citizens, and are often brutal.

While inculcation of initial beliefs is bound to be slow, transition to a policy environment that is inclusive and transparent is daunting too but growing awareness among the citizens is likely to facilitate it.

The Election Commission of India cannot be a super government

Elections bring the Election Commission of India (ECI) into sharp focus as this constitutional body superintends, directs and controls the conduct of elections. It is the constitutional duty of the ECI to ensure that the elections held are free and fair.

- The Supreme Court held in *Mohinder Singh Gill vs Chief Election Commissioner* (AIR 1978 SC 851) that **Article 324** contains plenary powers to ensure free and fair elections and these are vested in the ECI which can take all necessary steps to achieve this constitutional object.

Election commission of India:

- **Article 324 to 329** of the constitution deals with powers, function, tenure, eligibility, etc of the commission and the member.
- **Article 324:** The superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for, and the conduct of, all elections to Parliament and to the Legislature of every State and of elections to the offices of President and Vice-President held under this Constitution shall be vested in a Commission (referred to in this Constitution as the Election Commission).

Composition

- **Article 324(2):** The Election Commission shall consist of the Chief Election Commissioner and such number of other Election Commissioners, if any, as the President may from time to time fix and the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners shall, subject to the provisions of any law made in that behalf by Parliament, be made by the President.
- **Article 324(3):** When any other Election Commissioner is so appointed the Chief Election Commissioner shall act as the Chairman of the Election Commission.
- **Article 324(4):** The President may also appoint after consultation with the Election Commission such **Regional Commissioners** as he may consider necessary to assist the Election Commission in the performance of the functions conferred on the Commission by clause (1).

The Model Code of Conduct

- The model code of conduct issued by the ECI is a **set of guidelines meant for political parties, candidates and governments to adhere to during an election.**
- This code is based on **consensus among political parties.**
- Its origin can be traced to a code of conduct for political parties prepared by the Kerala government in 1960 for the Assembly elections.
- It was adopted and refined and enlarged by the ECI in later years, and was enforced strictly from 1991 onwards.

- Thus, the code has been issued in exercise of its powers under **Article 324**.
- The model code is observed by all stakeholders for fear of action by the ECI.

Concerns:

- **Enforceability of the code:** Since it is a code of conduct framed on the basis of a consensus among political parties, it has not been given any legal backing.
 - ✓ Although a committee of Parliament recommended that the code should be made a part of the **Representation of the People Act 1951**, the ECI did not agree to it on the ground that once it becomes a part of law, all matters connected with the enforcement of the code will be taken to court, which would delay elections.
 - ✓ **Paragraph 16A of the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968** says that the commission may suspend or withdraw recognition of a recognised political party if it refuses to observe the model code of conduct.
 - ✓ The withdrawal of the recognition of a party recognised under these orders seriously effects the functioning of political parties.

When the code is legally not enforceable, how can the ECI resort to a punitive action such as withdrawal of recognition?

- **Administrative moves by ECI**
 - ✓ According to the model code, **Ministers cannot announce any financial grants in any form**, make any promise of construction of roads, provision of drinking water facilities, etc or make any ad hoc appointments in the government departments or public undertakings.
 - ✓ A recent decision of the ECI to stop the Government of Kerala from continuing to supply kits containing rice, pulses, cooking oil, etc is a case in point.
 - ✓ The Supreme Court had in **S. Subramaniam Balaji vs Govt. of T. Nadu & Ors (2013)** held that the distribution of colour TVs, computers, cycles, goats, cows, etc, done or promised by the government is in the nature of welfare measures and is in accordance with the directive principles of state policy, and therefore it is permissible during an election.
 - ✓ Further, **Section 123 (2)(b) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951** says that declaration of a public policy or the exercise of a legal right will not be regarded as interfering with the free exercise of the electoral right.
- **Transfer of officials:** One issue relates to the abrupt transfer of senior officials working under State governments by an order of the commission.
 - ✓ The ECI apparently acts on such reports and orders the transfer on the assumption that the presence of those officials will adversely affect the free and fair election in that State.
 - ✓ It is actually not clear whether the ECI can transfer a State government official in exercise of the general powers under Article 324 or under the model code.
 - ✓ Article 324 does not confer unlimited powers on the ECI to do anything in connection with the elections.
 - ✓ In **Mohinder Singh Gill's case** (supra), the Court had made it abundantly clear that the ECI can draw power from Article 324 only when no law exists which governs a particular matter.
 - ✓ Transfer of officials, etc is governed by rules made under **Article 309** of the Constitution which cannot be bypassed by the ECI under the purported exercise of power conferred by Article 324.
 - **Article 309:** Recruitment and conditions of service of persons serving the Union or a State Subject to the provisions of this Constitution, Acts of the appropriate Legislature may regulate the recruitment, and conditions of service of persons appointed, to public services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of any State

There is no doubt that the ECI, through the conduct of free and fair elections in an extremely complex country, has restored the purity of the legislative bodies. However, no constitutional body is vested with unguided and absolute powers.

Vaccines for all above 18 from May 1; States can buy directly

Amid a virulent second wave of COVID-19 infections, the government has allowed vaccination of all persons above the age of 18 from May 1.

- Serum Institute of India is supposed to have supplied 100 million doses of Covishield every month from May but has said it would not be able to do so before July.
- Bharat Biotech, manufacturer of Covaxin, whose current capacity is around 20 crore doses annually, is supplying around 1 crore vaccines a month.

Background

- India began the "**World's Largest Vaccination Program**" on January 16, 2021. India has approved the Covid-19 vaccines developed by **Astra-Zeneca (Covishield) and Bharat Biotech (Covaxin)**.
- Out of the two vaccines, **Covaxin is an inactivated vaccine** whereas **Covishield is a live vaccine**.
- In the **first phase of vaccination**, the first 3 crore people to be vaccinated include the healthcare workers and frontline workers.
- The cost of vaccination of these people will be borne by the government.
- The two vaccines have been distributed to different states and Union territories.
- At present, beneficiaries have not been given the option to choose the vaccine they will be administered.
- To monitor the inoculation drive and track the listed beneficiaries for vaccination on a real-time basis, the central government has developed Covid **Vaccine Intelligence Network or Co-WIN application**.
- Several States have complained of **shortages** and having to close down vaccination centres.
- The Centre subsequently allowed imported vaccines to apply for supply without first conducting mandatory local trials.

Key points:

Immunisation Phase 3

- It will also enable vaccine manufacturers to sell half their vaccines to State governments and the open market.
 - ✓ The rest will mandatorily be sold to the Centre.
- Manufacturers would make an **advance declaration of the price for 50% supply** that would be available to State governments and in the open market, before May 1.
 - ✓ States, private hospitals, industrial establishments etc. would be able to procure vaccine doses from the manufacturers.
 - ✓ Private hospitals would have to procure their supplies of vaccines exclusively from the **50% supplied to the States and open market**.
- **Criteria:** The Centre, from its share, would allocate vaccines to States/UTs based on the criteria of extent of infection (number of active Covid cases) & performance (speed of administration).
 - ✓ **Wastage of vaccines** will also be considered and will affect the criteria negatively.

- ✓ Based on the above, state-wise quota would be decided.
- ✓ The ongoing vaccination programme for healthcare workers, frontline workers and those above 45 would continue.
- All vaccination would be part of the **National Vaccination Programme** and be obliged to follow all protocol such as being captured on CoWIN platform and report adverse events.
- **The stocks and price per vaccination** applicable in all vaccination centres will also have to be reported real-time.
- **Imported fully-ready-to-use vaccines can be entirely sold to the States** and the open market.

Significance:

- A wide range of vaccines, imported and locally produced, will be available in a wide range of price points.

Questions remain on whether enough stocks of vaccine will be available to cater to the accelerated demand from May.

Anti Defection Law - Goa Assembly case

After the interference of the Supreme Court of India, the Goa assembly Speaker recently agreed to advance the date of his decision on the disqualification petitions filed against ten former opposition party's MLAs who merged with the ruling government in 2019 from April 29 to April 20.

Background

- **Earlier, the former Chief Justice of India Sharad A Bobde asked the Solicitor General**, who appeared for the Speaker's office, whether the initial date of April 29 was fixed with an eye on the fact that he would retire on April 23.
- As per the court, the Speaker had resolved the disqualification proceedings for orders on February 26, so April 29 is not acceptable by the bench and asked the Speaker to dispose of the petition as soon as possible.
- The CJI had orally observed that nobody can have vested the right to delay a plea filed by a opposition leader, thus challenging the Speaker's delay of over 19 months to decide the disqualification petitions.
- The petitioner alleges that the 10 MLAs, purportedly claiming to form a two third of Indian National Congress in the state, decided to merge the said legislature party with the BJP and address a communication to that effect to the Speaker.
- The plea said based on the communication, the Speaker was pleased to take note of the alleged merger of INC's legislative party in Goa's Legislative assembly and allotted the 10 MLAs seats in the assembly along with the members of the BJP.
- The **petition has referred to a recent judgment of the Supreme Court** which is just the Speakers to decide on disqualification proceedings within a reasonable time, ideally three months.

ANTI DEFECTION LAW

- The **tenth schedule of the Constitution of India** also known as the **Anti Defection Law** was added to the Constitution by the **52nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1985** to combat the "evil of political defections" in legislatures- both Central and state.

- It lays down the grounds on which the legislators may be disqualified in cases of defection by the **Presiding Officer of the House** on a petition by any other member of the House. The decision of the Presiding Officer is final in this regard.

Grounds of Disqualification as per the Law

- If an **elected member voluntarily gives up his or her membership** of a political party.
- If a **member votes or abstains from voting in the house, contrary to the directions issued by his or her political party**. However, if the member has taken prior permission, or is condoned by the party within 15 days from the voting or abstention, then the member shall not be disqualified.
- If any independent candidate joins any political party after his/ her election to the House.
- If a nominated candidate joins any political party after the end of six months of his election to the house.

Disqualification Procedures

- The decision on the disqualification of a member on the grounds of defection is referred to the **Speaker or the Chairman of the house** and his/ her decision is final in this regard.
- The proceedings in relation to defection under the **10th schedule** are considered to be proceedings in parliament or the legislature of a state as is the case.

Exceptions made under the Law

- The law allows the legislators to change their party without the risk of disqualification in certain circumstances. These include:
- When there is a **merger of one party into another party**; provided that **at least 2/3rd of its legislators are in favor of the merger**.
- In such a scenario, neither the members who decided to merge nor the ones who stayed with the original party face disqualification charges.

Kihota Hollohon vs. Zachilhu (1992)

- In the judgment, the Supreme Court clarified that the **10th schedule is constitutionally valid and it neither impinges upon the freedom of speech and expression nor subverts the democratic rights of the elected members**.
- It also upheld the sweeping discretion available to the Speaker/ Chairman of the House in deciding cases of disqualification of MLAs.
- However, the apex court also held that the Presiding Officer's decisions of disqualification shall be open to judicial review.

Positive implications of the Anti Defection law

- The law to a certain extent ensures that the elected representatives stay loyal to the mandate given to them by their constituents and that they do not steal the mandate for personal motives.
- Due to this, the **toppling of the ruling dispensation has become a difficult task**, as legislators are prevented from switching sides.
- It provides a scope to reprimand elected representatives who have defected from their party to another.
- The law helps in promoting party discipline.
- It facilitates **mergers of political parties** without attracting the provisions of anti defection.

Concerns with the Law

- The law restricts the legislators from voting according to their conscience and thus is a challenge **to one's internal judgements**.
- Over time, it has been observed that the Presiding Officer who in most cases has a political affiliation fails to perform his duties impartially.
- **The Presiding Officer** who is the deciding authority lacks enough judicial competence to decide on such sensitive matters.
- It impedes legislative control over the government.
- It affects the spirit of discussion and debate in the legislature.
- The difference between the nominated and the independent members under the law is found to be absurd.
- While the current law provides for disqualification, it is rendered toothless because the resigning MLAs, even if disqualified, are allowed to recontest the by elections and return to the house.

Way Forward

- As per the **Dinesh Goswami Committee (1990)**, the disqualification provision should specifically be limited to defying the party whip in motions of confidence, money bill, and vote of thanks to the President.
- The disqualifying authority should be vested in the Governor/ President who shall act on the **advice of the Election Commission**.
- Parity has to be there between the nominated and the independent members.
- The **Law Commission in its 170th report** recommended for the deletion of the provisions that exempts splits and mergers from disqualification.
- The Commission also recommended that pre-poll electoral fronts should be treated as political parties under anti defection and the political parties should limit the issuance of whips only to such instances when the government's stability is in danger.
- Given the rise in problems in the modern world, it is high time the legislation either reviews or implements the recommendations given by the various committees. What is currently needed is a rationalized version of the Anti Defection law.

National Security Act, 1980

A close scrutiny of the orders by district magistrates invoking the National Security Act shows why the draconian law is so readily invoked. The NSA empowers the state to detain a person without a formal charge and without trial.

Background

- An analysis of records shows that the draconian law was invoked in **Uttar Pradesh** to prevent the person from being released from judicial custody even if the accused had got bail.
- **In 12 detentions** under the NSA between January 2018 and December 2020, the person remained in jail for more than 200 days after the **Criminal Court** had granted bail.
- **In 3 detentions**, the persons remained in jail for more than 300 days and in one case for 325 days and in another for 308 days.

National Security Act, 1980

About NSA (1980)

- The National Security Act is a **preventive detention law** in India. It empowers the state to **detain a person without the formal charge and without trial**.
- Preventive detention refers to the detainment (containment) of a person in order to keep him or her from committing future crimes and/or from escaping future prosecution.

Constitutional Provisions:

- **Article 22(3)** of the Constitution of India provides for preventive detention and restriction on **Personal Liberty** for reasons of **state security and public order**.
- Further, **article 22 (4)** provides that no law providing for preventive detention shall authorize the detention of a person for a longer period than three months unless:
- an **Advisory Board** reports sufficient cause for extended detention.
 - ✓ The **44th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1978** tried to reduce the period of detention without obtaining the opinion of an Advisory Board from three to two months. However, this provision has not yet been brought into force and therefore the original period of three months still continues.
- Such a person is detained in accordance with the provisions of any law made by the parliament.

Origin of the law

- The preventive detention laws in India date back to the early days of the colonial British era when the **Bengal regulation III of 1818** was enacted with the purpose of empowering the government to arrest anyone for defence or maintenance of law and order without giving the person recourse to judicial proceedings.
- **Later in 1919**, the British government enacted the **Rowlatt Act** which allowed the confinement of a suspect without trial.
- In the post independence era, India got its first preventive detention rule **under the government of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru** when he enacted the **preventive detention Act of 1950** that expired in 1969.
- The National Security Act, 1980 is a **close iteration** of the **1950 Act**.

Powers given to the Government under the Act

- The NSA gives the power to the central or the state government to detain a person and prevent him from Acting in any manner prejudicial to national security.
- The government can also detain a person to prevent him from disrupting public order all for maintenance of supplies and services that are essential to the community.

Period of confinement under the Act

- The maximum period for which a person can be detained under the NSA is 12 months. However, the term can be extended if the government finds fresh evidence against the person.

Why is the law debated?

- The law is often termed as a draconian one as no basic rights are given to the people who are detained under it. This includes:
- The right to be informed of the **reason for the arrest (section 50 of the criminal procedure code-CrPC)**- A person who is detained under the NSA, can be kept in the dark about the reasons for his or her arrest for up to five days, and in exceptional circumstances up to 10 days.
- Even if the grounds of arrest are provided to the detained person, the government has the right to withhold the information that it considers to be against public interest to disclose.
- **Section 56 and 76 of the Criminal Procedure Code** also provides that a person has to be **produced before a court within 24 hours of his or her arrest**. No such facility is given to the persons detained under the NSA.
- **As per Article 22(1)** of the Constitution of India an arrested person cannot be denied the right to consult and to be defended by a legal practitioner of his or her choice.
- However, a person who is detained under the NSA is not entitled to the aid of any legal practitioner in any matter connected with the proceedings before an Advisory Board which is constituted by the Government for dealing with the NSA cases.
- The detained person also **does not have the right to move a bail application** before a Criminal Court.

Safeguards under the Act

- A crucial procedural safeguard that has been provided under the NSA is granted **under article 22(5)**.
- It provides for all the detained persons with the right to make an effective representation before an **independent Advisory Board**, which consists of three members, and the board is chaired by a member who is, or has been a judge of the High Court.
- As provided in this Act, in every case where a detention order has been made under this Act, the appropriate government shall, **within three weeks from the date of detention** of the person under the **order, place before the Advisory Board constituted** by it, the grounds on which the detention has been made under representation if any made by the person affected by the order and in case where the order has been made by an officer.

Criticisms of the Act

- The **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)** is the agency that collects and analyzes the crime data in the country. However, there is **no provision to include the cases under the NSA in its data as no FIRs are registered in such cases**. Hence, it becomes impossible to trace the exact number of detentions made under the Act.
- Even if a person is in police custody, the **District Magistrate can slap NSA against him**; and if a person has been granted bail by a trial court, he can be immediately detained under the NSA.
- Moreover, even when a person is acquitted by the court, then also he can be detained under the Act.

- The **District Magistrate**, who passes the order of detention, is protected under the Act as no prosecution or any legal proceeding can be initiated against the official who carries out such orders.

Judicial Views on the Act

- The higher judiciary has held that the preventive detention under the NSA has to be strictly construed keeping in view through “**delicate balance between Social Security and citizen freedom**”.
- The Supreme Court has held that to prevent the misuse of this potentially dangerous power, the law of preventive detention has to be **strictly construed and meticulous compliance with the procedural safeguards has to be ensured**.

Way forward

- Since the Act is more than 40 years old, changes are required to ensure that it is not used arbitrarily as this hampers the democracy and basic rights of an individual.
- The views of the Supreme Court in this regard must be held as a guideline and the law must be strictly construed and meticulously complied with procedural safeguards.

Reforming health insurance and pension schemes

Covid reminds us that a modern state is a welfare state — governments worldwide launched 1,600 plus new social protection programmes in 2020.

- Sustainable social security lies in raising India's 138th ranking in country per-capita GDP.
- There is the case for to our biggest health insurance and pension schemes:
 - ✓ The Employee State Insurance Scheme (ESIS) and Employee Provident Fund (EPF).
- Both have failed their clients since birthing and in COVID.

Employee State Insurance Scheme (ESIS)

- ESIS is India's richest and biggest health insurance scheme with 13 crore people covered and Rs 80,000 crore in cash.
- **Employers with more than 10 employees** make a mandatory 4 per cent payroll deduction for employees earning up to Rs 21,000 per month.

Employee Provident Fund (EPF)

- EPF is India's biggest pension scheme with a Rs 12 lakh crore corpus and 6.5 crore contributors.
- **Employers with more than 20 employees** make mandatory 24 per cent payroll deductions for employees earning up to Rs 15,000 per month.
- It only covers 10 per cent of India's labour force and 60 percent of accounts and 50 per cent of registered employers are inactive.

Concerns:

- The problems of EPF and ESIS are
 - ✓ poor coverage, high costs, unsatisfied customers,
 - ✓ metrics confused with goals, jail provisions,

- ✓ excessive corruption, low expertise, rude and unaccountable staff with no fear of falling or hope of rising, and
- ✓ no competition.
- **ESIC's unspent reserves** are larger than the Central government's healthcare budgetary allocation. Its annual profits of Rs 10,000 crore persist.
- Despite covering roughly 10 per cent of India's population, a recent working paper from Dvara Research suggests **high dissatisfaction**.
- EPF offers poor service and pathetic technology despite employer-funded administrative costs that make it the **world's most expensive government securities mutual fund**.
- **Low EPF interest rate:** At 8.5%, the EPF interest rate is at a seven-year low. The All India Trade Union Congress, which is a part of the Board, was opposed to reduction in interest on PF. **Small savings rates** range from 4.0-7.6%.
- **Falling ETF returns:** The EPFO invests 85% of its annual accruals in the debt market and 15% in equities through ETFs.

Way forward

- **Structure:** Apart from not having clients but hostages, EPF and ESIS combine the roles of policymaker, regulator, and service provider. Splitting roles is a precondition for performance because goals, strategy, and skills are different.
 - ✓ An independent service provider would invest heavily in technology, customer service, and human capital.
 - ✓ Splitting roles would lead to
 - competition from NPS for EPF,
 - ending VIP opt-out by merging CGHS with ESIS,
 - raising enforceability by making employee provident fund contribution voluntary,
 - improving portability by de-linking accounts from employers, and
 - targeting universalisation by simultaneously ending minimum employer head-count and employee salary contribution thresholds while introducing absolute contribution caps.
- **Governance:** The governing board of ESIS and EPFO have 59 and 33 members respectively.
 - ✓ Such a large group can't have meaningful discussions, make decisions, and exercise oversight.
 - ✓ This governance deficit needs smaller boards (not more than 15), age limits (70 years), term limits (10 years), expertise (technology, HR, health, pensions, finance, etc), active sub-committees (HR, Investments, and technology) and real powers (appointing the chief executive, setting targets, holding management accountable).
- **Leadership:** Health and pensions need complex skills developed over time. Yet, ESIS and EPF are led by generalist bureaucrats.
 - ✓ Both organisations need professional chief executives. A democracy's generalists are its politicians and its delivery organisations must be run by technocrats.

Social security can blunt structural and COVID inequality when combined with complementary policies like formalisation, financialisation, urbanisation, and better government schools.

Employee's Provident Fund (EPF)

- It is a retirement benefit scheme, available for all salaried employees.
- It is looked after and maintained by the **Employees Provident Fund Organisation of India (EPFO)**.

Eligibility:

- As per law, any registered company which has **more than 20 employees** has to get registered with the EPFO.
- All salaried employees are eligible for the Employee's Provident Fund (EPF).
- However, for a salaried employee earning **less than Rs 15,000 per month**, it is mandatory for them to register for an EPF account.

EPF Contribution by Employees and Employers

- Under the EPF scheme, both the **employee and the employer make an equal contribution towards the scheme**.
- **Once the employee retires**, he/she gets a lump sum amount – which includes the contribution made by self and the employer – with interest.
- The contribution made by both the employer and the employee is **12 percent of the employee's basic salary**.
- Though the entire 12 percent of the contribution made by the employee goes into their EPF account, **8.33 per cent out of 12 per cent from the employer's contribution is diverted to the employee's EPS (Employee's Pension Scheme) account**.
- The balance of 3.67 per cent from the employer's side goes into the employee's EPF account.

After backlash, Manipur retracts letter on Myanmar

The Manipur government has withdrawn a letter issued last week directing officials to not set up any camps for Myanmar nationals crossing the border into India and to “politely turn away” those seeking refuge.

Key points:

- The Myanmar refugees belong to the **Chin ethnic group comprising Lai, Tidim-Zomi, Lusei and Hualngo tribes** — related to the dominant Mizos in the Northeast.
- The Mizoram government is planning to provide employment to refugees under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).
- The MGNREGS is a central government scheme meant only for Indian citizens but the **rules are notified by the State government**.

Background

- Neighbouring State Mizoram which shares a 510-km border with Myanmar has been at odds with the Centre on the treatment of Myanmar nationals seeking refuge in India.

- More than thousand refugees from Myanmar have come; they are living in villages across the State.
- The **Tatmadaw, or Myanmar military**, had taken over the country after a coup on February 1.
- Initially, the Mizoram government had issued guidelines directing officials to provide shelter to those crossing over following the coup on February 1.
- The guidelines were withdrawn based on directions of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and the MHA issued guidelines in this regard to all States bordering Myanmar.

MHA stand

- The Home Ministry has sent two letters to states bordering Myanmar.
- It said that the refugees should be identified and deported.
- **State governments have no powers to grant “refugee” status to any foreigner” as India is not a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol.**

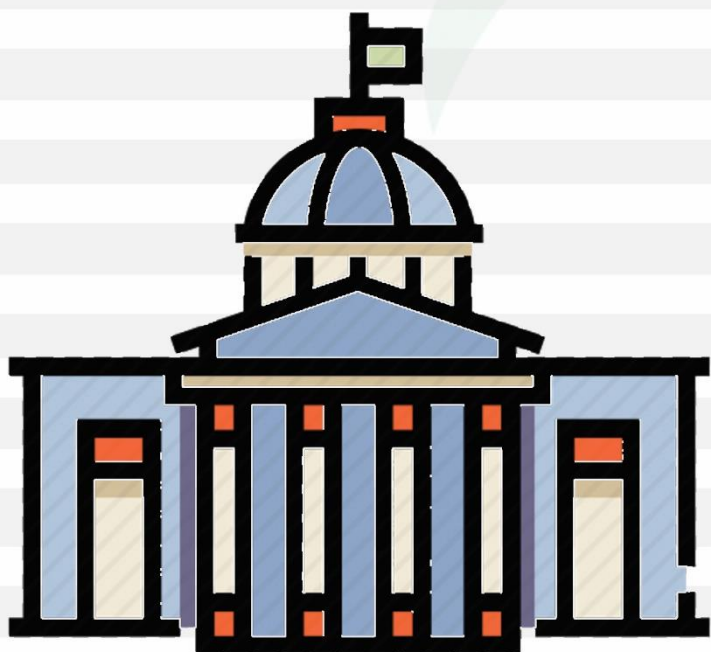
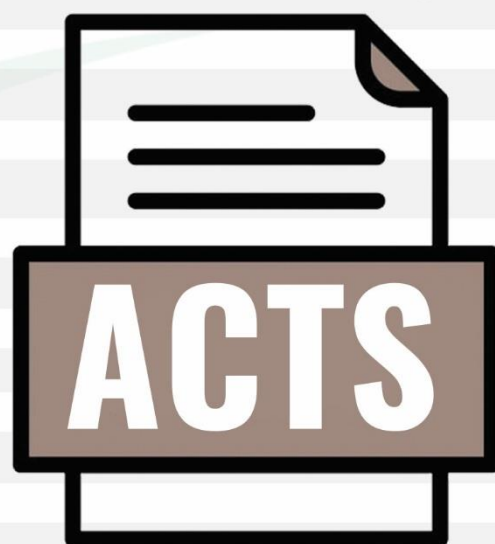
The four States share borders with Myanmar are - **Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Mizoram.**



Image source: Asia Times

CURRENT AFFAIRS

SCHEMES BILLS &



Lok Sabha clears healthcare professionals Bill

The National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professionals Bill was passed unanimously by the Lok Sabha. The Bill was passed by Rajya Sabha last week.

National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professionals Bill

- **Objective:** The Bill seeks to regulate and standardise the education and practice of allied and healthcare professionals.

Salient features:

- **Allied health professional:** The Bill defines 'allied health professional' as an associate, technician, or technologist trained to support the diagnosis and treatment of any illness, disease, injury, or impairment.
 - ✓ Such a professional should have obtained a diploma or degree under this Bill.
 - ✓ The duration of the degree /diploma should be at least 2,000 hours (over a period of two to four years)
- **Allied and healthcare professions:** The Bill specifies certain categories of allied and healthcare professions as recognised categories.
- **National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions:** The Bill sets up the National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions.
 - ✓ Clause 4(1) of the Bill provides for a **two-year tenure for chairperson and vice-chairperson of the Commission**, but there is a provision of recommendation of two more terms for the posts, so that the acting chairperson and vice-chairperson can effectively have a tenure of six years
- **Functions of the Commission:** The Commission will perform the following functions with regard to Allied and Healthcare professionals:
 - ✓ framing policies and standards for regulating education and practice,
 - ✓ creating and maintaining an online Central Register of all registered professionals,
 - ✓ providing basic standards of education, courses, curriculum, staff qualifications, examination, training, maximum fee payable for various categories, and
 - ✓ providing for a uniform entrance and exit examination, among others.
- **Healthcare professional:** A 'healthcare professional' includes a scientist, therapist, or any other professional who studies, advises, researches, supervises, or provides preventive, curative, rehabilitative, therapeutic, or promotional health services.
 - ✓ Such a professional should have obtained a degree under this Bill.
- **Professional Councils:** The Commission will constitute a Professional Council for every recognised category of allied and healthcare professions.
 - ✓ The Professional Council will consist of a president and four to 24 members, representing each profession in the recognised category.
 - ✓ The Commission may delegate any of its functions to this Council.
- **State Councils:** State governments will constitute State Allied and Healthcare Councils.
- **Establishment of institutions:** Prior permission of the State Council will be required to: (i) establish a new institution, or (ii) open new courses, increase the admission capacity, or admit a new batch of students to existing institutions.

Significance:

- The biggest backbone of our healthcare delivery system is our allied workers.

- With the **registration, and standardisation of professions**, the Bill would ensure **generation of more employment**.
- This standardisation will also **improve distribution of professionals** across the country, especially in rural and peripheral areas.
- **Inclusion of professionals** such as dieticians, physiotherapists etc, makes the healthcare system multi-disciplinary.

Way Forward

- Faster implementation of the provisions under the Bill.
- Increasing the number of professionals involved in the allied and healthcare sectors.
- Adequate emphasis on professional medical personnel.
- Addressing other issues related to the healthcare sector like infrastructure requirements, increase in budget outlay, increasing the research and development focused on healthcare innovations, etc.

Government introduces NaBFID Bill in Lok Sabha

The union cabinet has approved a budget proposal of setting up a development finance institution which will have tax benefits to enable fund raising from investors.

More on the news

- The finance minister of India introduced the National Bank for financing infrastructure and development bill, 2021 in the Lok Sabha.
- The bill paves the way for setting up a government owned development finance institution to fund infrastructure projects.
- The National Bank for financing infrastructure and development will be set up with a corpus of Rs. 20,000 crores and the government will give an initial grant of rupees 5000 crores.
- The government expects the development finance institution to leverage this fund to raise up to rupees 3 lakh crore in the next few years in the economy.

WHAT ARE DEVELOPMENT FINANCE INSTITUTIONS?

- A development finance institution or a development finance company is an organisation which is **owned by the government** or charitable institutions in the country. It is established to finance the low-cost projects or the projects in which the borrowers are not able to meet the finance requirements of the project from the commercial lenders in the market.
- The development finance institutions provide finance both for short term as well as for the long term. The short term finances are for less than 5 years while the long term finances are for more than 5 years.
- The source of capital for these institutions is national or International Development funds.
- The development finance institutions ensure their creditworthiness and their ability to provide project finance at a very competitive rate.
- Such institutions do not accept deposits from the people and only function as funding institutions.
- They are different from the commercial banks from the point of view that this drive to strike a balance between commercial operational norms that are followed by the commercial banks on one hand and the developmental responsibilities on the other.

- This implies that they do not just have a role as plain lenders like the commercial banks but are companions in the development process of an economy whose sole objective is to promote the economic growth in the country.

NATIONAL BANK FOR FINANCING INFRASTRUCTURE AND DEVELOPMENT (NaBFID)

- **Ownership**- At the initial stage, the 100% stake in the NaBFID will be of the Government of India. Gradually the government will bring down its stake in the institution to 26% in the coming years.
- **Purpose** - The purpose of setting up the institution will be to provide finance for social and economic infrastructure projects that have been identified under the national infrastructure pipeline (NIP).
- **Management** - A professional board will be set up that will have at least 50% of the members as non-official directors.
- **Capital infusion** - The capital infusion by the Government of India will be of rupees 20,000 crores. The initial grant to the institution constitutes rupees 5000 crores. The institution is then expected to raise around rupees 3,00,000 crores in the next few years by the market funds.
- **Tax exemption** - The Government of India will provide a 10 year tax exemption 2 funds that will be invested in the DFI. This will help attract long term players such as insurance and pension funds.

ADVANTAGES OF SETTING UP A DEVELOPMENT FINANCE INSTITUTION TO FUND THE INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

- It will help to boost the economic growth in the country and will also lead to an increase in the capital flows and energize the capital markets of the economy.
- It will help in improving the situation of the long term finances in the economy.
- It will be a mechanism to provide a credit enhancement for infrastructure and housing projects that have been stalled till now due to the credit crunch.
- As India does not have a Development Bank, such an institution can help fulfil the need for India to have an institutional mechanism that is solely designed for funding capital requirements.
- It will help improve the debt flow towards the infrastructure projects.
- The Reserve Bank of India in 2017 clearly specified that a specialised bank can help in catering to the wholesale and the long term financing needs of the growing Indian economy and it will also aid in filling the current gap in the long term financing.
- The development finance institution can also help in easing the burden on the public sector banks and improve their efficiency as they are highly caught in the vicious cycle of increasing non-performing assets.
- It will mobilize the rupees 111 lakh crores that is required for the funding of the ambitious **National Infrastructure Pipeline (Nip)**.
- It will also help in enhancing the credit rating of projects in India.
- It will help in funding the projects where others especially the private sector is not willing to enter because of the risks involved in them.

NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE PIPELINE

- The national infrastructure pipeline announced by the Government of India is the first of its kind, whole of the government exercise to provide world class infrastructure to the citizens of India and improve their quality of their lives.
- It is a group of social and economic infrastructure projects in India that is to be completed in the period of 5 years from 2019 to 2025.

- It will help enable forward outlook on the infra structure projects and also lead to the creation of jobs, improve the ease of living and provide equitable access to infrastructure to all. This will make the growth in the economy more inclusive.
- It will help in stepping up the annual infrastructure investment and help in the achievement of the goal of being a 5 trillion dollars economy by 2024 -25.
- It will give a boost to the agrarian economy by strengthening the agricultural and rural infrastructure.
- It will lead to an increase in the connectivity across India, especially in the rural areas through the expansion of roads and railways across the country.
- It will improve India's rank on the ease of doing business index as well developed infrastructure helps enhance the level of economic activity in the country.
- It will create an additional fiscal space by improving the revenue base of the government and ensure the quality of expenditure focused in productive areas.
- It will provide an impetus to the manufacturing capacity with reduction in the leakages due to insufficient infrastructure that has slowed down the manufacturing processes.
- It will also encourage new players - both national and international -to enter the market in the manufacturing business.

WAY FORWARD

- The earlier generation of DFIs in India ran into a problem of financing because the retail deposit access was cornered by the banks and available for long-term financing without government guarantees was limited. India must ensure that such mistakes are not repeated again.
- The government must formulate a comprehensive policy that addresses all the concerns related to NaBFID/ DFI.
- Government can think of collaborating with foreign countries for setting up such an institution.

Tribal Health Collaborative 'Anamaya'

Anamaya, the Tribal Health Collaborative was launched by Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare and Union Minister of Tribal Affairs.

About

- The Collaborative is a multi-stakeholder initiative of the **Tribal Affairs Ministry** supported by Piramal Foundation and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF).
- It will converge efforts of various Government agencies and organisations to enhance the health and nutrition status of the tribal communities of India.

Objectives:

- It aims to build a sustainable, high-performing health eco-system to address the key health challenges faced by the tribal population of India.
- It will begin its operations with 50 tribal, Aspirational Districts (with more than 20% ST population) across 6 high tribal population states.
- Over a 10-year period, the work of the THC will be extended to 177 tribal Districts as recognised by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

Significance:

- This Collaborative is a unique initiative bringing together governments, philanthropists, national and international foundations, NGOs/CBOs to end all preventable deaths among the tribal communities of India.
- The Ministry has created a roadmap to address tribal health issues through the Tribal Health Action Plan.
- The tribal people of our country are facing challenges of health and nutrition. The collaboration between Government and Non-Government agencies to address this challenge is a very welcome decision”.
- There is a need for community involvement and community engagement to make the tribal health plan a success.

Only 5.4% of houses under Centre's flagship scheme reached completion so far this year

Less than 6% of houses sanctioned under the Centre's flagship rural housing schemes Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin have only completed 55% of its construction target in 2020-21. The Rural Development Ministry told a Parliamentary Standing Committee.

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin

- The erstwhile rural housing scheme Indira Awaas yojana (IAY) has been restructured into Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana –Gramin (PMAY-G).
- **Objectives:** To provide a pucca house, with basic amenities, to all houseless householder and those households living in kutcha and dilapidated house, by 2022.
 - ✓ Construction of 2.95 crore houses with all basic amenities by the year 2022.
 - ✓ **Training of Rural Masons** with the objective of improving workmanship and quality of construction of houses while at the same time, increasing availability of skilled masons and enhancing employability of such masons.
- **Funding:** The cost of unit assistance in this scheme is shared between Central and State Governments in the ratio **60:40 in plain areas** and 90: 10 for North Eastern and Himalayan States.
- **Selection criteria:** Selection of beneficiaries under Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) is based on housing deprivation parameters of **Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC), 2011**, subject to 13 point exclusion criteria, followed by **Gram Sabha verification**.
- Households that are houseless or living in zero, one or two room kutcha houses (kutcha wall and kutcha roof) are provided financial assistance for construction of pucca houses under PMAY-G.

Key points:

- **Missed targets:** The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin has **only completed 55% of its construction target**.
- Nationwide, the Ministry's target was to sanction 63 lakh houses this year.
- Only 34 lakh were actually sanctioned, and only 1.9 lakh of those had reached completion at the end of January.
- **Reasons behind delay:** Money has been sanctioned for almost 85% of beneficiaries. However, the advent of the pandemic caused long delays at every stage.

- ✓ Delay is due to unavailability of construction materials, labour, delay in inspection of stages of house construction etc.
- **Creation of employment:** Some States such as Odisha and Jharkhand used the scheme to provide employment opportunities for migrant workers who returned to their villages during the crisis.
 - ✓ The initiative helped in creation of jobs for migrant workers involved in masonry and labour work in the rural sector and thereby ensuring regular income to the workers during COVID-19 crisis.

Shaphari scheme

The Marine Products Exports Development Authority (MPEDA) has developed a certification scheme for aquaculture products called 'Shaphari'.

Shaphari

- The Shaphari scheme is **based on the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization's technical guidelines on aquaculture certification.**
- **Components:** It will have two components — **certifying hatcheries for the quality of their seeds** and, separately, **approving shrimp farms that adopt the requisite good practices.**
- The certification of hatcheries will help farmers easily identify good quality seed producers.
- Those who successfully clear multiple audits of their operations shall be granted a **certificate for a period of two years.**
- The entire certification process will be online to minimise human errors and ensure higher credibility and transparency.
- **Objectives:**
 - ✓ It aims to bolster confidence in India's frozen shrimp produce, the country's biggest seafood export item,
 - ✓ It aims to certify hatcheries and farms that adopt good aquaculture practices.

Significance:

- Frozen shrimp is **India's largest exported seafood item.**
- It constituted 50.58% in quantity and 73.2% in terms of total U.S. dollar earnings from the sector during 2019-20. **Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Odisha, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu** are India's major shrimp producing States, and around 95% of the cultured shrimp produce is exported.
- India exported frozen shrimp worth almost \$5 billion in 2019-20, with the U.S. and China its biggest buyers.
- Overall, certified aquaculture products will **help exporters to export their consignments to markets under stringent food safety regulations** without the fear of getting rejected.

Problem faced by exporters: **Container shortages** and incidents of seafood consignments being rejected because of **food safety concerns** like the presence of antibiotic residue.

- **The National Residue Control Programme for food safety issues** in farm produce and pre-harvest testing system is in place, but this certification was proposed as a market-based tool for hatcheries to adopt good aquaculture practices and help produce quality antibiotic-free shrimp products to assure global consumers.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

INTERNATIONAL

DEVELOPMENT



India-Russia Talks

Recently, an important round of discussion between India and Russia took place, between the visiting **Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov** and **External Affairs Minister of India**.

- Russian Foreign Minister's visit to Delhi this week showed that India-Russia ties are under strain.

Background:

- To build on the common "resilient" ground Indian and Russian Foreign Ministers addressed each other's concerns on a wide range of issues
- The issues range from defence supplies to the S-400 air defence system, India's role in Afghanistan and Taliban's involvement in power-sharing to cooperation on Covid vaccines and Delhi's participation in the Quad grouping.

The visit by the Russian foreign minister coincides with the tour of India by the **US special presidential envoy** for climate, John Kerry.

- The US embassy's spokesperson said that Washington viewed India as an important partner in future clean energy, research, development and deployment.
- Mr. Lavrov recently visited **China** where both the countries put up a joint front against the US.
- India on the other hand, has called upon China to withdraw from the remaining friction points along the LAC following the spirit of disengagement that was achieved at Pangong Tso earlier.
- **The presence of Moscow's special envoy on Afghanistan** at the discussion will provide a first-hand briefing on the latest Russian moves on Afghan front. He has argued for engaging the Taliban for a fruitful negotiation.
- Russia recently held a summit '**one Afghanistan**' on March 18th, 2021, where India was not invited.
- The present meeting is therefore being interpreted as a move to update New Delhi about the latest on the Afghan issue.
- Another major item that is expected to feature in the current talks is the pending delivery of the **Russian S 400 missile defense system** to India
- India is expected to receive the first S 400 system later this year.
- The delivery may attract U.S. sanctions under the **Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA)**.

Key points:

- On the bilateral front, both sides discussed progress on
- Strategic cooperation, cooperation in energy, nuclear and space sectors
- A free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).
- Military-technical cooperation for the joint production of India-made Russian weapons.
- More investment in connectivity including the **International North-South Transport Corridor** and the **Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor**.
- **Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor**: This sea route covers a distance of approximately 5,600 nautical miles, or about 10,300 km. A large container ship travelling at the normal cruising speed of 20-25 knots, or 37-46 km/hour, should be able to cover the distance in 10-12 days.
- **International North-South Transport Corridor** envisions a 7,200-km-long multi-mode network of **ship, rail and road route** for transporting freight, aimed at reducing the carriage cost between India and Russia by about 30% and bringing down the transit time from 40 days by more than half.

- There was no mention of the upcoming delivery of the **\$5 billion S-400 missile defence system**.
 - ✓ The S-400 Triumph is an air defence missile system developed by Almaz Central Design Bureau of Russia.
- **Russia-China ties:** Russian Foreign Minister praised Russia-China ties but these said that aren't aimed at a "military alliance."
- **India's "Indo-Pacific" strategy:** He preferred the more continental reference to the "Asia-Pacific" region instead of Indo-Pacific.
- He also **referred to the Quad grouping** and called it an "**Asian NATO**", a term sometimes used by China.
 - ✓ He said both sides agreed that military alliances in Asia were inadvisable and counterproductive.
 - ✓ **Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)** is an informal strategic dialogue between India, USA, Japan and Australia with a shared objective to ensure and support a "free, open and prosperous" Indo-Pacific region.
- **Afghan peace:** In Afghanistan as well, the Russian is pushing for bringing the Taliban into a power-sharing arrangement in Kabul is against India's consistent push for a "democratic Afghanistan".
- **Russia-Pakistan ties:** Russia was ready to strengthen Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts with the supply of "relevant equipment".

India Russia Relations

- Russia has been an **all-weather friend** of India for a long time. The relationship with the country is a key pillar of India's foreign policy.
- The bilateral ties in recent times have suffered minor drawbacks mainly due to India's inclination to the West and Russia's growing relationship with China.
- Despite the differences, the other shared ties have remained strong. The Prime Minister of India, visited **Russia's Vladivostok to participate in the 20th India Russia annual summit and the 5th eastern Economic Forum**.
- This was the first Indian Prime Minister's visit to the **Russian Far East** which gave a new direction, new energy and new speed to the bilateral relations between the two countries.
- As India and Russia both desire a multipolar world, they are equally important for each other in fulfilling each other's national interests. However, going by the changing geopolitical scenario around the globe, the relations between the two countries are not as good as it used to be in the Cold War era.

Importance of Russia for India

- **Defence-** Russia has remained the largest importer of defence equipment to India.
- **Nuclear Energy-** Russia recognises India's need to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. In December 2014, the **Department of Atomic Energy (DAE)** and Russia's Rosatom signed the Strategic Vision for strengthening cooperation in peaceful uses of atomic energy between India and Russia. **Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant (KKNPP)** is being built in India with Russian cooperation.
- **Strategic-** considering strong ties between **Russia and China**, India sees it as an actor that can influence China amidst increasing clashes between India and China. Russia recently organised a trilateral meeting among the foreign ministers of Russia, India, and China following deadly clashes in the **Galwan Valley in the disputed territory of Ladakh**.
- **Space cooperation** - The year 2020 marked the 45th anniversary of the launch of India's first satellite "**Aryabhata**" on a **Russian (then USSR) launch vehicle "Soyuz"**. Both sides are also exploring the possibility of cooperation in manned space flight.
- **Combating terrorism-** India and Russia have been working closely to finalize the comprehensive convention on international terrorism as clearly as possible.

- **Emerging New Sectors of Economic Engagement**- apart from the traditional areas of cooperation like weapons, hydrocarbons, nuclear energy and diamonds, there are several new sectors of economic engagement that are likely to be large in the near future. These include- **mining, agro industrial, and high technology including robotics, nanotechnology as well as biotechnology.**
- In addition to this, India's presence in the Russian forest and in the Arctic is likely to expand in the near future and the connectivity projects may get a boost too.
- **Support at Multilateral Forums**- Russia has been a supporter of India's candidacy for permanent membership of the **United Nations Security Council** as well as the **Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).**

Major Concerns regarding India-Russia Relations

- I. **India's growing inclination to the West:** China's expansionist foreign policy has forced India to shed its past hesitations and actively pursue closer relations with the West, especially the US. This can be seen in a determined restart of the Quad process and a clearer enunciation of a free and inclusive Indo-Pacific by both India as well as the US.
- II. **Russia's growing inclination to the East:** The Western countries have imposed harsh economic sanctions on Russia after its annexation of Crimea in 2014.
 - Russia has responded to these efforts to isolate it, by revving its own **"Pivot to the East" Policy.**
 - The most distinct results of this include the markedly improved relations with China, and better ties with Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan.
 - **Russia's Pivot to the East policy** is not in synergy with that of the US and this in turn affects the relationship between India and Russia suffers.
- III. Russia's decision to **supply M-35 Hind attack Helicopters to Pakistan** has further alarmed the Indian defense establishment.

Way Forward

- India must rebuild on its strengths and concerns with the Russians.
- Both the countries need to revitalize their earlier agreement on sharing intelligence for a joint strategy on terrorism.
- India needs to pursue and facilitate Russia's engagement in the Indo Pacific as it could contribute to make the Indo pacific truly free and inclusive.
- There is a need to promote a mutually beneficial trilateral cooperation between Russia, India and China that could contribute towards the reduction of mistrust and suspicion between India and China. The RIC (Russia-India-China) Forum can act as a platform for such an engagement.
- India and Russia continue to share a common strategic rationale for their relationship.
- Apart from bilateral synergies, the two countries are members of various multilateral organizations like **BRICS, RIC, G20, East Asia summit and SCO.** These provide avenues for cooperation on issues of mutual importance and must be used effectively by both the countries.

While India and Russia have successfully addressed divergences between them, the traditional and "time-tested relations" cannot be taken for granted. The two sides should try to dispel the notion that those ties are under any strain.

India abstains in U.N. Human Rights Council vote on Sri Lanka

India abstained from a crucial vote on Sri Lanka's rights record at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva.

- The **resolution on 'Promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka'** was adopted after 22 states of the **47-member Council** voted in its favour.
- Sri Lanka rejected the resolution as "politically motivated".
- 11 countries, including China, Pakistan, Russia and Bangladesh, voted against the resolution, and in support of the Sri Lankan government.
- The Sri Lanka resolution was the first to be voted on using the extraordinary e-voting procedures established for the **UNHRC 46th Session**, which has been held virtually.

Objectives of resolution: Probing war crimes

- The UN aims to collect and preserve evidence of war crimes in the country, committed by the armed forces and the LTTE.
- Process envisaged in the resolution aims to prosecute war criminals through an international evidence gathering and investigation mechanism.

Rationale behind India's move:

- India must have decided to abstain after "careful consideration" of following factors:
 - ✓ of **supporting the Tamils** for equality, justice, dignity and peace, and
 - ✓ ensuring the **unity, stability and territorial integrity of Sri Lanka**.

U.N. Human Rights Council

- UNHRC was reconstituted from its predecessor organisation, **the UN Commission on Human Rights** to help overcome the "credibility deficit" of the previous organisation.
- **Headquartered** in Geneva, Switzerland.
- UN Human Rights is **part of the United Nations Secretariat**, and its headquarters in Geneva, as well as an office in New York.
- The High Commissioner for Human Rights is the **principal human rights official** of the United Nations.

Membership

- Under the Human Rights Council's rules, seats are allocated to regions to ensure geographical representation.
- The Council is made of **47 Member States**, which are elected by the majority of members of the **General Assembly of the United Nations through direct and secret ballot**.
- The General Assembly takes into account the candidate States' contribution to the promotion and protection of human rights, as well as their voluntary pledges and commitments in this regard.
- Members of the Council serve for a **period of three years** and are not eligible for immediate re-election after serving two consecutive terms.

Functions:

- The **Universal Periodic Review (UPR)** is a mechanism of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC) that emerged from the 2005 UN reform process.
- The UNHRC passes **non-binding resolutions on human rights issues through UPR.**
- **It collaborates with** Governments, parliaments, judicial authorities, police and prison officials, National Human Rights Institutions, NGOs and a broad range of other civil society actors, in addition to United Nations partners, to build awareness of and respect for human rights.
- **Since Governments have the primary responsibility to protect human rights,** the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) provides expertise and technical training to Governments to help implement international human rights standards on the ground.

Issue of Chinese Disengagement from Ladakh

India hopes that China will work with it to ensure disengagement of troops in the remaining areas of eastern Ladakh at the earliest, and asserted that the de-escalation of tension alone will lead to restoration of **peace and tranquility** in the border areas and provide conditions for the progress of bilateral ties between the two countries.

Background:

- In **February 2021**, India and China decided to finally reach an agreement on the disengagement at **Pangong Lake** that has been at the heart of the recent LAC tensions.
- Both sides agreed to a **withdrawal of frontline personnel, armored elements**, and also proposed the creation of a buffer zone that will put a temporary moratorium on patrolling in the disputed lake.
- China also asked India to vacate the heights it occupied in an effective counter move in the **Kailash range.**
- This engagement procedure between the two countries is a promising start towards the restoration of peace and tranquility in the border areas.
- **It is a significant step forward** and it has provided a good basis for resolution of other remaining issues along the **Line of Actual Control** in the western sector.
- The two sides had detailed exchange of views on the remaining issues both at the senior commanders' meeting and discussions held under the **Framework of Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on Border Affairs.**

India- China Border

- India shares a **3488 kilometer** long boundary with China. However it is unfortunate that the entire boundary is disputed.
- The line which delineates the boundary between the two countries is popularly known as the **McMahon Line**, after its author **Sir Henry McMahon**.
- In **1913**, the British India government had called a trip a tight conference, where the boundary between India and Tibet was formalized after a discussion between the Indians and Tibetans.
- A convention was adopted, which resulted in the delimitation of the Indo Tibetan boundary. This boundary is not accepted by China which terms it as illegal.
- **In 1957**, China occupied **Aksai Chin** and built a road through it. This move by China was followed by intermittent clashes along the border that finally resulted in the border war of 1962.
- After this war, the boundary known as the **Line of actual Control (LAC)** came into existence. It is a **military held line**.

Border Dispute between India and China

- The border between India and China is not clearly demarcated throughout and there is no mutually agreed Line of actual Control (LAC).
- The LAC is divided into 3 sectors: **Western, Eastern and the Middle**.
- The boundary dispute in the **western sector (Ladakh)** what means to the Johnson line that was proposed by the British in the 1860s and extended up to the **Kunlun Mountains and put Aksai Chin** in the then princely state of **Jammu and Kashmir**. India used this line and claimed Aksai Chin as its own. China however did not recognize it and it accepts the McDonald line that puts Aksai Chin under its control.
- In the **middle sector i.e., Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand**, the dispute is a minor one and India and China have exchanged Maps on which they broadly agree.
- In the **eastern sector that is Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim**, the dispute is over the McMahon line in Arunachal Pradesh. This was decided in 1914 in a meeting of representatives of China, British India and Tibet in Shimla. Though the Chinese representatives at the meeting initiated the agreement, they subsequently refused to accept it. The Tawang tract claimed by China was taken over by India in 1951.

History of India- Border Standoffs

i. 1967

- Tensions started to increase along the two mountain passes, **Nathu La and Cho La**, That connected Sikkim, which was then a Kingdom and protectorate of India and China's Tibet autonomous region.
- A scuffle broke out when the Indian troops began laying barbed wire along the Indian recognized India China border.
- The scuffle soon escalated after a Chinese military unit began firing artillery shells at the Indians.
- The ensuing conflict killed more than 150 Indians and 340 Chinese.
- India prevailed as it destroyed Chinese fortifications in **Nathu La and pushed them further back into their territory near Cho La**.
- The change in positions however meant that China and India had different and conflicting ideas about the location of the Line of Actual Control.

ii. 2013

- After decades of patrolling the border, Chinese platoon pitched a camp near **Daulat Beg Oldi** in April 2013.
- The Indians soon followed and set up their own base that was less than 1000 feet away from the Chinese base.
- The camps were later fortified by troops and heavy equipment.
- By May 2013, the two sides had agreed to dismantle both encampments, but the disputes about the location of the **Line of Actual Control (LAC)** still persisted.

iii. 2017

- **India and China** engaged in a standoff at **Doklam Plateau**, an area of the Himalayas that is controlled by Bhutan.
- The Chinese set to work building a road in the **Doklam plateau** in June 2017.
- The Indian troops carrying weapons and operating bulldozers confronted the Chinese with the intention of destroying the road.
- This was followed by a standoff where soldiers threw rocks at each other and the troops from both sides suffered injuries.
- In August 2017, both the countries agreed to withdraw from the area and China also stopped the construction of the road

iv. 2020

- The current disengagement process between the two countries is to resolve the 2020 standoff in **Ladakh**.
- Violence broke out in the **Galwan Valley on the India China border** and claimed the lives of about 20 Indian soldiers.
- The Valley is strategically located between Ladakh in the West and Aksai Chin in the East, which is currently controlled by China as part of its Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region.
- At the western end of it is the **Shyok River and the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road**, whose eastern mouth lies not far from China's vital Xinjiang Tibet road, now known as the G219 highway.
- The Chinese soldiers also crossed the LAC around the **Galwan River Valley** and moved into the **Indian Territory** at multiple locations in eastern Ladakh, across the LAC leading to the high levels of tensions between India and China.
- The reasons for the Chinese interventions include **infrastructure development along the Line of Actual Control, reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir global backlash against China for mishandling of gold 19 under growing India US proximity**.

The Disengagement Process

- India and China agreed to resolve the nine-month military standoff along the **Line of Actual Control in Ladakh and the Chinese and Indian troops** on the southern and northern shores of Pangong Tso began a **synchronized and organized disengagement** in line with the consensus reached between the Corps commanders in January, 2021.
- The disengagement process for now seems restricted to the **North and South banks of Pangong Tso**.
- Both the sides agreed to remove the forward deployment in a **phased, coordinated and verified manner**.
- China agreed to pull its troops on the North bank towards the East of Finger 8 and India agreed to position its forces at its permanent base at Dhan Singh Thapa post near Finger 3. Similar action was agreed to be taken by both the parties in the South Bank area as well.
- The two sides also agreed that the area between **Finger 3 and Finger 8** will become a non patrolling zone temporarily, till both sides reach an agreement through military and diplomatic discussions to restore petroleum.

- The North and South banks of Pangong Tso are two of the most significant and sensitive regions when it comes to the recent standoff that began in May 2020. This is because the area marked the beginning of the standoff and is one of the areas where the Chinese troops had come around **8 kilometer deep West of India's perception of the Line of Actual Control**.
- After this action, India also repositioned its troops on the North bank to occupy the Heights overlooking Chinese positions on the North bank as well.

Way Forward

- India should pitch hard to club the **Depsang Plains** issue along with the **Ladakh border dispute** and find a holistic solution to both of them.
- The response by India should not be confined to just managing the border dispute but also extend to **attack Chinese commercial interests** in India and aligning itself more closely with its quad partners, especially in the maritime domain.
- India should explore other routes like **diplomatic** and **militaristic conquest** of China. India also needs to establish formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan.
- The crisis created in Ladakh should be looked upon as an opportunity to carry out the long pending defence reforms in India like the military's internal organization, rise in pension expenditure, etc.

Japan to fund A&N, METRO EXPANSION

In the first-ever official development assistance (ODA) project in Andaman & Nicobar (A&N), Japan has approved grant aid to improve the power supply in the islands.

Key points:

- Japan has also extended yen loans worth ¥229.5 billion, or ₹16,186 crore, for executing four projects.
- Loan agreements were signed between the **Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)** and the government.
- These projects including
 - ✓ Delhi Metro's Phase 4
 - ✓ Bengaluru Metro's Phase 2 expansion plans
 - ✓ The grant would be used to procure **15MWh batteries** as well as power system stabilisers to allow better utilisation of solar power generated in South Andaman.
 - ✓ A loan of ₹807 crore was extended for crop diversification in Himachal Pradesh and ₹3,272 crore in loans to rural water supply with a focus on mitigating fluorosis in Rajasthan's **Jhunjhunu and Barmer districts**.

Significance:

- **Indo-Pacific:** Due to its **geopolitical location**, the islands play a crucial role in shared vision for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific.
- Cooperation between Japan and India on these crucial islands demonstrate the commitment of both countries to realising a stable, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

BIMSTEC meets skirts Myanmar violence

Recently, the Minister of External Affairs of India attended the virtual ministerial meet of BIMSTEC.

More on the news

- India expressed commitment about taking the Bay of Bengal community to new Heights.
- The meeting drew participation from all the seven member states including Myanmar which is currently witnessing a large-scale crackdown against **anti military protesters**.
- As per India the National Security Advisers have been working closely and have moved forward in several aspects of security cooperation including counter terrorism, intelligence sharing, coastal security, cyber-security, etc. in a tangible manner”.
- Cohesion among the members has been difficult to achieve mainly due to the **Rohingya refugee crisis** which has created bitterness between **Myanmar and Bangladesh**.
- It has also affected the working of the organization to some extent as it could not develop a common charter.
- India's External Minister announced that the organization is soon going to have a common set of rules and goals and hoped that all member states will timely complete their internal procedures for its adoption at the 5th BIMSTEC summit.
- The meeting- 17th BIMSTEC Ministerial, **chaired by Sri Lanka**, however avoided any reference to Myanmar's current crisis.

About BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation)

- BIMSTEC is a regional multilateral organization having a secretariat located in Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- It has **seven members** that lie in the littoral and adjacent areas of Bay of Bengal constituting a contiguous regional unity.
- The seven members are:
 - ✓ Bangladesh
 - ✓ Bhutan
 - ✓ India
 - ✓ Nepal
 - ✓ Sri Lanka
 - ✓ Myanmar
 - ✓ Thailand
- The first five members are from South Asia while the other two are from South East Asia.
- It not only **connects South Asia with South East Asia**, but also the ecologies of the Bay of Bengal and the Great Himalayas.
- Its main objective is to create an enabling environment for rapid development, acceleration of social progress and promotion of collaboration on matters of common interests in the region.

Origin of BIMSTEC

- This sub regional organisation came into being in 1997 through the **Bangkok declaration**.
- It was initially formed with four member states with the acronym **BIST- EC** for **Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand Economic Cooperation**.
- Later it was renamed as **BIMST-EC** in 1997 after the inclusion of **Myanmar**.
- The organisation admitted **Nepal and Bhutan** in 2004, and with this the name of the grouping was changed to their Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Objectives of the Organisation:

- To create an enabling environment for rapid economic development of the sub region.
- To encourage the spirit of equality and partnership among the members.
- To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in areas of common interest of the member countries.
- To accelerate support for each other in fields like education, science and technology, etc.

Principles of the Organisation:

- Sovereign equality
- Territorial integrity
- Political independence
- Non interference in the internal affairs of each other
- Peaceful coexistence
- Mutual benefit
- Constitute an addition to and not a substitute for bilateral, regional or multilateral cooperation involving the member states.

Potential of BIMSTEC

- It can act as the **bridge between South Asia and South East Asia** and reinforcement of relations among the member countries.
- It provides a platform for **intra regional cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN members**.
- It is a home to around 1.5 billion people that constitute around **22% of the global population**.
- With a combined gross domestic product of **2.7 trillion dollar economy**, its member states have been able to sustain an **average 6.5% economic growth trajectory in the last five years**.
- The Bay also has vast untapped natural resources and over one-fourth (¼) of the world's traded goods cross it every year.
- There are several important connectivity projects between the member countries like
 - ✓ **Kaladan Multimodal Project** that links India and Myanmar
 - ✓ **Asian Trilateral Highway** connecting India and Thailand through Myanmar
 - ✓ **Bangladesh- Bhutan- India- Nepal (BBIN) Motor Vehicles Agreement** to ensure seamless flow of passenger and cargo traffic.

Areas of Cooperation

- Trade and Investment
- Technology
- Energy

- Transportation and Communication
- Tourism
- Fisheries
- Agriculture
- Cultural Cooperation
- Environment and Disaster Management
- Public Health
- People-to-People Contact
- Poverty Alleviation
- Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime
- Climate Change

Institutional mechanisms of BIMSTEC

- **BIMSTEC summit-** is the highest policy making body of the organization and is composed of heads of the state/ government of the member states.
- **Ministerial Meeting-** is the 2nd apex policymaking forum of the organization and is attended by the external/ foreign affairs ministers of the member states.
- **Senior Officials Meeting-** it is represented by the senior officials of foreign ministries of the member states.
- **BIMSTEC Working Group-** It is attended by the ambassadors of BIMSTEC member countries to Bangladesh or their representatives on a monthly basis at the BIMSTEC secretariat in Dhaka.
- **Business Forum and Economic Forum-** These are the two important forums that ensure active participation of the private sector in the organization.

Significance of BIMSTEC for India

- It allows India to pursue **three of its core policies**:
 - ✓ **Neighbourhood First Policy** which is of primacy to the country's immediate periphery.
 - ✓ **Act East Policy** that connects India and South East Asia.
 - ✓ **Economic development of India's North Eastern states** by linking them to the Bay of Bengal region through Bangladesh and Myanmar.
- It provides a platform to India to counter China's creeping influence over the countries around the **Bay of Bengal due to the spread of its Belt and Road Initiative**.
- It provides a new platform for India to engage with its neighbors, especially with the **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)** becoming dysfunctional due to the differences between India and Pakistan.
- **For New Delhi**, one key reason for engagement is in the vast potential that is unlocked with stronger connectivity. About **300 million people**, roughly a quarter of India's population, live in the **four coastal states** that are adjacent to the Bay of Bengal- **Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal**.
- **From a strategic point of view**, the Bay of Bengal is a funnel to the **Malacca straits** and has emerged as a key theater for an increasingly assertive China in maintaining its access route to the Indian Ocean.

Challenges faced by the organization

- The summits are scheduled to be held every two years and the ministerial meetings every year. However, only four summits have taken place in 20 years up to 2018. The 5th summit is scheduled to be held in 2022.
- It seems that India has used BIMSTEC only after the failure of SAARC in the regional setting and the other major members like **Thailand and Myanmar are more focused towards ASEAN than BIMSTEC**.

- The focus of the organization is very wide which includes **14 areas of cooperation like connectivity, public health, agriculture**, etc. it is often suggested that it should remain committed to small focus areas and cooperate in them efficiently.
- There are several bilateral issues between the member nations including the refugee crisis of Rohingyas from Myanmar with Bangladesh, border conflict between Myanmar and Thailand, etc.
- The **BIMSTEC free trade agreement (FTA)** which was negotiated in 2004 remains yet to be concluded.
- The formation of another sub regional initiative, the **Bangladesh- China- India- Myanmar (BCIM) Forum**, with the proactive membership of China has created more doubts about the exclusive potential of the organization.

Ending trade ban between India and Pakistan

In a major step by Islamabad to attempt revival of relations with New Delhi, the Pakistan government considered the resumption of trade ties with India.

More on the news

- Pakistan's cabinet committee on Economic Affairs is going to decide on importing sugar and cotton from India.
- **Pakistan snapped ties with India following August 2019 aggregation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir** and the division of the state into two new union territories.
- Pakistan's Prime Minister, responded to India's Prime Minister's letter wishing him on Pakistan's National Day and mentioned that Pakistan wants peace with its neighbors, including India..
- Creation of an enabling environment is imperative for a constructive and result oriented dialogue and this exchange of letters comes amidst a renewed push for peace between the two countries
- The
- Earlier, the **DGMOs India and Pakistan** had announced that both the countries had agreed to strict observance of all agreements, understanding and cease firing along the Line of Control and all other sectors.

Relations between India and Pakistan before the Ban

- **Trade relations between the sub continental neighbours -India and Pakistan** have always been linked to their political interactions, even their tumultuous relationship.
- Following the Pulwama attacks in 2019, the trade relations between India and Pakistan across the Wagah Attari border and the line of control (LoC) **Salamabad- Chakhan da Bagh routes** were closed.
- India also withdrew the **most favored nation (MFN) status from Pakistan**.
- In response **Pakistan also imposed a few counter measures like an airspace ban and suspension of trade relations**.

Why did Pakistan ban trade relations with India?

- The decision by Pakistan to suspend the bilateral trade with India was taken in August 2019 primarily as fallout of **India's decision to abrogate article 370 of the Indian constitution** that provided special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir and afforded it a certain amount of autonomy.
- Pakistan called the move as **illegal and took this trade measure as a way of showing its dissatisfaction** towards the decision taken by the Indian government.

- However, an underlying reason for the suspension of trade between the two countries was also the **200% tariff** imposed by **New Delhi on Pakistani imports**, a move that was taken by India after revoking its status as a **most favored nation** following the suicide bomb attack **one CRPF in Pulwama**.
- **Experts considered the announcement by Pakistan**, coupled with India's decision to revoke its MFN status and duties on its goods to be one of the most drastic trade measures that have been taken in the already soured diplomatic relations between the two countries.
- The trade between **India and Pakistan** suffered greatly in **2019-20**, with India's imports to Pakistan **falling by nearly 60.5% to \$816.62 million, added imports plummeting around 97% to \$13.97 million**.

Why does Pakistan want a revival in the trade relations with India now?

- The proposal to lift the ban on cotton imports from India to Pakistan has come in the backdrop of a shortfall in the raw materials for Pakistan's textile sector, because it repeatedly be increasing issues due to a **low domestic yield of cotton in the country**.
- In addition to this, imports from other countries like the **US and Brazil** have reportedly been more expensive for Pakistan and take a longer time to arrive in the country.
- Cotton has been one of the major imports from India to Pakistan. **In 2018-19, Pakistan imported cotton worth \$550.33 million** from India. When coupled **with \$ 457.75 million** worth of organic chemicals, these products made up around half of its total imports from India.
- However, **in 2019-20**, the cotton **imports by Pakistan from India dropped to \$64.25 million**.
- As far as sugar is concerned, trade experts feel that it is a result of the longstanding interdependence between the two countries over such agricultural commodities and a potential shortage in the domestic supply.
- Pakistan's **sugar imports** from India between July- February 2020-21 sold nearly by **6,296 percent to 2,78,733 metric tons** from **4,358 metric tons** in the same period in **2019-20**.
- Even when there was a very small positive list of goods for trade between India and Pakistan, agricultural commodities were always there in the list.
- If finally approved, **cotton and sugar would be the second and third commodities** that will be allowed for **export from India to Pakistan after Islamabad lifted the ban on medicines and related raw material imports**, in may 2020 to ensure sufficient supply of essential drugs during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The country has **imported about \$183.18 million worth of organic chemicals and pharmaceutical products** from India during the period of April- January 2020-21.

Implications of the suspension of trade relations between the two countries

- About 10,000 families, roughly 50,000 people, in Punjab and about 900 families in Kashmir had been directly impacted due to the ban on trade between the two countries.
- Both the countries suffered huge economic losses having lost billions of dollars and hundreds of job days.
- The measures that led to a 200% duty increase on imports from Pakistan to India at **Punjab saw even the relatively meagre bilateral trade of \$2.56 billion in 2018-2019 dropping to \$547.22 million (April-August 2019)** with imports dropping from about \$500 million to just \$11.45 million.
- Similarly, the closure of **LoC trading points in Jammu and Kashmir** has put small trade, handicrafts sellers, truckers, labourers, and **hotel owners near the LoC in Baramulla and Poonch out of business**.

Way forward

- **Economic interdependence** between the two countries can be used as one of the dimensions of soft power between them.

- The **economic interdependence through bilateral trade** will help in easing out the tensions at the cross border arising out of unemployment, poverty and low living conditions, as it will help in bringing out more employment opportunities, and prosperity in the region that in turn will help in dismantling the military institutions and their coercive means to capture power in Pakistan and their actions which are aimed at anti India agenda and generally are responsible for ceasefire violations in India.
- **India can deepen its economic ties** with its neighboring country Pakistan by **reducing the import tariffs** which is presently at 200% and also by **invoking its most favored nation status** at a time when Pakistan's economy is in its worst phase owing to the situation created by the pandemic.
- The ASEAN region can be used as an example where many territorial disputes between the countries have been resolved by increasing the economic interdependence between them.

Partnership between India, Bangladesh

The Prime Minister of India visited the neighbouring country Bangladesh on the occasion of 50 years of Bangladesh's independence.

More on the News

- Prime Minister has said that the assassination of **Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman** in 1975 deprived the region of the destiny that could and should have been "ours to share".
- A sovereign, self-confident Bangladesh, at peace with its neighbours, bearing friendship to all and malice towards none, was rising fast from the ashes of a painful war.
- If this had continued, perhaps India and Bangladesh could have achieved many decades ago some of the accomplishments that we were able to reach only recently.
- Citing the example of the **2015 Land Boundary Agreement between India and Bangladesh**, he said that had Bangabandhu been at the helm longer, this achievement may have come much earlier.

INDIA BANGLADESH RELATIONS

India and Bangladesh have for long shared historical and civilisational ties. They have remained friendly ever since the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971. India attaches highest diplomatic importance to Bangladesh which can be reduced from regular bilateral visits of leaders of both countries. Clear 2021 commemorates 50 years of the bilateral relationship between India and Bangladesh

Cooperation between India and Bangladesh

i. Defence cooperation

- Several joint exercises take place between the 2 countries for example exercise Sampriti between the armies of India and Bangladesh and exercise Milan between the navies of India and Bangladesh.
- India shares 4096.7 kilometres border with Bangladesh which is the longest land boundary with any of its neighbours and hence it becomes important for India to secure its water with Bangladesh.
- The land boundary agreement between India and Bangladesh came into force after the exchange of instruments of ratification in June 2015.

ii. Cooperation over rivers

- India shares 54 common rivers with Bangladesh and bilateral joint rivers Commission has been working between the 2 since June 1972 to maintain Allision between them to maximize benefits from common River systems.

iii. Cooperation over connectivity

- India and Bangladesh jointly inaugurated the newly restored railway link between haldibari in India and Chilahati in Bangladesh.
- The 2 countries welcome the signing of a second addendum to the protocol on inland water transit and trade.
- The 2 countries are also a part of Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal initiative motor vehicles agreement that enables the commencement of the movement of goods and passengers to provide seamless people to people contact and enhance economic interaction by facilitating cross border movement of people and of goods.
- Owing to its strategic geopolitical location Bangladesh acts as a gateway for India to South East Asia. It is a central component of various connectivity projects like BBIN. It also plays a major role in connectivity to the North eastern states of India.

iv. Economic Cooperation

- Bangladesh is India's highest trade partner in South Asia and is an important destination for Indian exports.
- India's exports to Bangladesh for financial year 2018-19 (April-March) stood at US 9.21 billion USD and imports from Bangladesh for the same period stood at US 1.22 Billion USD.
- India has also granted duty free and quota free access to Bangladeshi exports.

v. Cooperation in the power sector

- It has become one of the hallmarks of India Bangladesh relations and Bangladesh currently imports 1160 megawatt of power from India.

vi. Partnership on multilateral forums

- Bangladesh has supported India in its election to the United Nations Security council.
- Both countries have agreed to continue working together towards achieving early reforms at the United Nations Security Council, combating climate change, achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the protection of the rights of the migrants.
- The 2 countries are members of common regional forums like the South Asian Association for regional cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for multi sectoral technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

vii. Development of the North eastern region of India

- Transit and transshipment to the North eastern states of India through Bangladesh helps in increasing the connectivity to the region and ensuring peace, ability and economic development of the region.
- Cooperation with Bangladesh has also helped in curbing the insurgency problem in the North eastern states of India.

Challenges in India Bangladesh relations

- **River water disputes-** India shares about 54 transboundary rivers with Bangladesh and the latter lies downstream in majority of these River streams. This has given rise to the concerns in Bangladesh over sharing of River waters interlinking of rivers on building of dams in India. For example, the Teesta River water dispute.

- **Trade imbalance-** Bangladesh has often complained about the bilateral trade tilts towards India.
- **China factor-** in recent years, we have witnessed the Chinese influence over Bangladesh increasing tremendously like enhancing the list of products for duty free access into its markets and providing massive loans for developmental projects. In addition to this Bangladesh is overwhelmingly dependent on China for its military hardwares.
- **Issue in border management** - loss of civilian lives at the border and smuggling of arms narcotics and fake currency has been a matter of concern.
- **Citizenship Amendment Act 2019-** the new citizenship law granting Indian citizenship to persecuted religious minorities from Bangladesh indirectly implied the poor treatment for religious minorities in Bangladesh and this brought negative publicity for Dhaka. Also, Bangladesh has remained from its stance that no migrants travelled to Assam illegally during the 1971 war of independence and NRC may risk the relations between the 2 countries.
- **The Rohingya issue and India's remarks in 2017** about it has upset Bangladesh which has been facing the challenge of providing shelter to more than 1 million Rohingya refugees fleeing persecution.
- Since 2010 India has approved 3 lines of credit to Bangladesh of \$7.362 bn to finance the developmental projects in the latter. But due to bureaucratic red tapism, just \$442 mn had been disbursed by 2018.

Way Forward

- Both the countries can adopt a basin wide approach in formulating a new framework for the sharing of River waters.
- Allowing work permits to resolve the migration issue in a manner that does not adversely affect the society and economy of both countries.
- India should expedite the implementation of projects including India Bangladesh friendship pipeline, Maitree Super Thermal Project, etc. to highlight the highest priority India attaches to Bangladesh under India's Neighbourhood First Policy.
- Addressing the issues of non-tariff barriers and trade facilitation including port restrictions, procedural bottlenecks, etc. for reducing the trade imbalance.
- Effective implementation of the ongoing coordinated border management plan.
- The two countries need to focus on priority areas, such as investments, security connectivity development, cross border energy cooperation, blue economy, cultural economy, environment and disaster management etc.
- Bangladesh-India relations have reached a stage of maturity. Bilateral ties can be expected to grow stronger in the future. It is for India to take the lead to remove these irritants.

Explained: Why Saudi Arabia has raised oil shipping costs to Asia in response to India cutting imports

Saudi Arabia's national oil company Saud Aramco has raised the price of oil shipments to Asia by between 20-50 cents per barrel. The hike may be a signal to India, which has been looking to diversify supplies away from Saudi Arabia.

Background:

- OPEC+, a group of 23 major oil-producing countries that had cut crude oil production levels during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic as the price of Brent crude fell to below \$20 per barrel.
- It decided to maintain lower production levels through April despite crude oil prices recovering to pre-pandemic levels.

- A consistent rise in crude oil prices has contributed to auto fuel prices reaching record highs in India as it imports over 80 per cent of its crude oil requirements.

India looks to diversify the sources

- India's state-owned oil marketing companies are set to **cut imports from Saudi Arabia** in response to Saudi Arabia maintaining production cuts aimed at keeping oil prices elevated through April.
- Producers can pressurize on terms like shipping and flexibility of contracts if importers try to diversify their source of supply.
- India has repeatedly called on oil-producing countries to withdraw production cuts, noting that high crude oil prices were slowing down the economic recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in developing countries.

Impact on India

- A consistent rise in crude oil prices has led to the **prices of petrol and diesel reaching a record high level across India**.
- Rising crude oil prices have also magnified the impact of central and state taxes on auto fuels which were hiked significantly in 2020 to boost revenues amid lower economic activity.

Dependence on Saudi Arabia

- Saudi Arabia has consistently been the **second-largest source of crude oil for India** after Iraq was displaced by the United States in February.
- A reduction in crude oil imports from Saudi Arabia would likely lead to increased imports from other gulf countries and the United States according to sources aware of developments.
- Saudi Arabia will, however, continue to be one of the largest sources for the import of crude oil for India due to its **geographical proximity and India's large crude oil requirements**.

OPEC+

- The non-OPEC countries which export crude oil along with the 14 OPEC members are termed as OPEC plus countries.
- OPEC plus countries include Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Brunei, Malaysia, Mexico, Oman, Russia, South Sudan, and Sudan.
- **Saudi Arabia and Russia**, both have been at the heart of a three-year alliance of oil producers known as OPEC Plus — which now includes 11 OPEC members and 10 non-OPEC nations — that aims to shore up oil prices with production cuts.

India hosts First Meeting of BRICS Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors

India hosted a Meeting of BRICS Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors virtually on April 6, 2021.

- The meeting was jointly chaired by Union Minister for Finance & Corporate Affairs and Governor, Reserve Bank of India.
- Participants included Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors of the BRICS countries.

About BRICS

BRICS brings together five major emerging economies, comprising 43 percent of the world population, having 30 percent of the world GDP and 17 percent share in the world trade.

- The acronym BRIC was **first used** in 2001 by Goldman Sachs in their Global Economics Paper.
- BRIC started after the meeting of the leaders of Russia, India and China in St. Petersburg on the margins of G8 Outreach Summit in 2006.
- The grouping was formalised during the first meeting of BRIC foreign ministers on the margins of **UNGA in New York in 2006**. The first BRIC Summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, on June 16, 2009.
- It was agreed to expand BRIC into BRICS with the **inclusion of South Africa** at the BRIC foreign ministers' meeting in New York in September 2010.
- The five BRICS countries are also members of G-20.

What is the objective of BRICS?

- Broader commitment to cooperate for **strengthening multilateralism**, the rule of law and equitable international order.
- BRICS leader's stress "the centrality of the **rules-based, transparent, non-discriminatory, open and inclusive multilateral trading**", based on the World Trade Organisation.

Key points:

- As 2021 BRICS Chair, India's approach is focused on **strengthening intra-BRICS cooperation** based on Continuity, Consolidation and Consensus.
- BRICS Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors discussed financial cooperation agenda set by India for 2021 -
 - ✓ Global Economic Outlook and Response to COVID-19 pandemic,
 - ✓ **New Development Bank (NDB)** Activities,
 - ✓ Social Infrastructure Financing and Use of Digital Technologies,
 - ✓ Cooperation on Customs related issues, IMF reforms, Fintech for SMEs and Financial Inclusion,
 - ✓ BRICS Rapid Information Security channel and **BRICS Bond Fund**.
 - ✓ The needs and aspirations of BRICS in particular and emerging markets and developing economies in general.
 - ✓ Greater coordination among BRICS member countries on the issues of **16th general review of Quotas of IMF**.

New Development Bank (NDB)

About:

- **Idea:** At the fourth **BRICS Summit in New Delhi (2012)**, the leaders of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa considered the possibility of setting up a new Development Bank to mobilize resources for infrastructure and sustainable development projects in BRICS and other emerging economies, as well as in developing countries.
- **Agreement:** Following the report from the Finance Ministers at the fifth **BRICS summit in Durban (2013)**, the leaders **agreed on the feasibility of establishing** the New Development Bank and made the decision to do so.
- **Origin:** During the sixth **BRICS Summit in Fortaleza (2014)**, the leaders signed the Agreement establishing the New Development Bank (NDB).
- **The Bank formally came into existence** as a legal entity at the inaugural meeting of the Board of Governors of the NDB chaired by Russia and held on the eve of the Ufa Summit in 2015.
 - ✓ During the meeting, the appointment of the President, **Mr. K.V. Kamath**(Current President), as well as four Vice Presidents and the Board of Directors took place.
- **The NDB became fully operational** at the signing of the Headquarters Agreement with the government of the People's Republic of China in 2016. **HQ – Shanghai**

Objectives: In the Fortaleza Declaration, the leaders stressed that:

- the NDB will strengthen cooperation among BRICS and
- will supplement the efforts of multilateral and regional financial institutions for global development, thus
- contributing to collective commitments for achieving the goal of strong, sustainable and balanced growth.

Capital: The authorized capital for NDB is \$100 Billion while initial subscribed capital is \$50 billion. Initial subscribed capital was equally distributed among the founding members {\$10 billion each}.

Voting power of each member is equal to the number of its subscribed shares in capital stock.

The new leadership in continuing this momentum forward and taking NDB to the next level in terms of lending performance to members, transparency, international credibility and effectively achieving the NDB mandate. She suggested that the focus should also be given to achieve the twin objective of preserving BRICS values and growing NDB into a global development institution.

US warship stirs the waters 'without Indian consent', Delhi conveys concern

The US Seventh Fleet announced that one of its warships had carried out a Freedom of Navigation operation "inside India's exclusive economic zone, without requesting India's prior consent."

Background:

- 7TH FLEET is the largest of the US Navy's forward deployed fleets. USS John Paul Jones asserted navigational rights and freedoms approximately 130 nautical miles west of the Lakshadweep Islands.
- India requires prior consent for military exercises or maneuvers in its exclusive economic zone or continental shelf, a claim inconsistent with international law.

India's response:

- India has conveyed concerns regarding this passage through our EEZ to the Government of USA through diplomatic channels.
- The USS John Paul Jones was continuously monitored transiting from the Persian Gulf towards the Malacca Straits.
- India said that the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea** does not authorise other States to carry out in the Exclusive Economic Zone and on the continental shelf, military exercises or manoeuvres, without the consent of the coastal state.

The Freedom of Navigation Operations

- It involves passages conducted by the US Navy through waters claimed by coastal nations as their exclusive territory.
- According to the US Department of Defense (DoD), the FON Program has existed for 40 years, and "continuously reaffirmed the United States' policy of exercising and asserting its navigation and overflight rights and freedoms around the world".

The Territorial Waters, Continental Shelf, Exclusive Economic Zone and Other Maritime Zones Act, 1976

- As per India's Territorial Waters, Continental Shelf, Exclusive Economic Zone and Other Maritime Zones Act, 1976, **the EEZ of India "is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial waters, and the limit of such zone is two hundred nautical miles from the baseline"**.
- India's **"limit of the territorial waters** is the line every point of which is at a distance of twelve nautical miles from the nearest point of the appropriate baseline"
- As per the Indian law "all foreign ships (other than warships including submarines and other underwater vehicles) shall enjoy the right of innocent passage through the territorial waters" and a passage is innocent "so long as it is not prejudicial to the peace, good order or security of India".
- Foreign warships including submarines and other underwater vehicles may enter or pass through the territorial waters after giving prior notice to the Central Government

Exclusive Economic Zone

- According to UNCLOS, the EEZ “is an area beyond and adjacent to the territorial sea, subject to the specific legal regime” under which “the rights and jurisdiction of the coastal State and the rights and freedoms of other States are governed by the relevant provisions of this Convention”.

Significance:

- It comes at a time when **military cooperation between India and the US** is on the rise. India and the US, along with Australia and Japan, make the **Quadrilateral grouping**.
- The Quad members, for the first time since 2007, had together participated in the **Malabar multilateral war gaming exercise** last November.
- While **India ratified UN Law of the Seas in 1995**, the US has failed to do it so far.
- Freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) by USN ships in South China Sea, are meant to convey a message to China that the putative EEZ around the artificial SCS islands is an excessive maritime claim.

United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

- The Convention entered into force on November 16, 1994, and established an **international framework for law over "all ocean space, its uses and resources"**.
- The ITLOS is one of four dispute resolution mechanisms listed at Article 287 of the **UNCLOS**.
- The Convention also established the **International Seabed Authority**, with responsibility for the regulation of seabed mining beyond the limits of national jurisdiction, that is beyond the limits of the territorial sea, the contiguous zone and the continental shelf.

Principles of UNCLOS

- Freedom of high seas,
- Peaceful uses of world oceans,
- National sovereign over territorial waters,
- Freedom of innocent passage of the ships through territorial waters and archipelagic zones,
- Freedom of transit through international straits,
- Marine environment protection,
- Peaceful settlement of a dispute.

Salient features of UNCLOS:

- **Every state shall effectively exercise its jurisdiction** and control in administrative, technical and social matters over ships flying its flag.
- **Piracy as per UNCLOS:** Any illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship or a private aircraft, and directed:
- **Freedom of high seas:** High seas represent that sea area which is not a part of any sovereign state. The high seas are open to all states, whether coastal or landlocked.
- **Right of innocent passage:** Passage means navigation through the territorial sea for the purpose of traversing the sea without entering internal waters or calling a port facility outside internal waters.
- **Seizure of pirate ship:** On high seas, or in any other place outside the jurisdiction of any state, every state may seize a pirate ship, or a ship taken by piracy and under the control of pirates, and arrest the persons and seize the property on board.

Right of hot pursuit: The hot pursuit of a foreign ship may be undertaken when the competent authorities of the coastal state have a good reason to believe that the ship has violated the laws and regulations of that state.

US imposes new sanctions on Russia

The United States expelled 10 Russian diplomats in retaliation for Russia's U.S. election interference, a massive cyber attack and other hostile activity.

- President Joe Biden ordered a widening of restrictions on U.S. banks trading in Russian government debt.
- The US also blacklisted 32 individuals alleged to have tried to meddle in the 2020 presidential election, the White House said in a statement.

USA's statement

- The US alleged that Russian intelligence agencies mounted disinformation and dirty tricks campaigns during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, in part to help Donald Trump's candidacy.
- There was a massive so-called **SolarWinds hack of U.S. government computer systems** last year.
- Russia's recent troop build up on the border of Ukraine is also worrying.
- The imprisonment of **Alexei Navalny**, who is effectively the last open political opponent to Mr. Putin has further raised tensions.

Russia's response:

- The United States is not accepting that there is a **multipolar world** that excludes American hegemony.

Iran starts enriching uranium to 60%

Iran began enriching uranium to its highest level ever to pressure talks in Vienna.

- International inspectors said Iran planned to do so above-ground at its **Natanz nuclear site**.
- Recently a suspected Israel attack damaged centrifuges at Natanz.

Uranium enrichment

- When uranium is mined, it consists of approximately **99.3% uranium-238 (U^{238})**, **0.7% uranium-235 (U^{235})**, and **< 0.01% uranium-234 (U^{234})**.
- These are the different uranium isotopes.
- Low-enriched uranium, which has a 3% - 4% concentration of **U-235**, can be used to produce fuel for nuclear power plants.
- **"Weapons-grade" uranium is 90% enriched.**
- Separation processes available to "enrich" Uranium, or extract 235 from its U238:
 - ✓ This includes **gas diffusion, centrifugal diffusion, and mass separation via magnetic field.**
 - ✓ Unlike its Plutonium counterpart Uranium 235 and 238 react similarly, thus making this enrichment process much more energy intensive.

Enrichment limit for Iran

- The Iran Nuclear deal limited Iran's enrichment to **3.67 %**.
- While 60 % is higher than any level Iran previously enriched uranium, it is still lower than weapons-grade levels of 90 %.
- Iran had been enriching up to 20 %.

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

- Iran has been a non-nuclear weapon state party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) since 1970.
- The Iran nuclear deal (formally the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) was signed between Iran and the P5 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council) plus Germany and the European Union.
 - ✓ Under the deal, Tehran agreed to limit its nuclear program in return for relief from the US and other economic sanctions.
 - ✓ **2018: The United States unilaterally withdrew** from the JCPOA objecting to Iran's ballistic missile program or its involvement in regional conflicts, **sunset clauses** of the deal which critics say provide Iran with a patient pathway to acquiring nuclear weapons. because it didn't address

Salients features of JCPOA:

- **Uranium enrichment capacity:** Iran's current capacity of 19,000 gas centrifuges would be reduced by more than two-thirds to 6,104, out of which just over 5,000 would actually be enriching uranium.
- **Fordow underground enrichment plant:** This cavern under a mountain near the city of Qom would be used only for non-military research.
- **The enriched uranium stockpile:** Iran's stockpile of LEU would be reduced from its current level of about 7,500kg to 300kg, a reduction of 96%.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

DEVELOPMENT ECONOMIC



Junk inefficiency: On vehicle scrappage policy

The vehicle scrappage policy announced by the Transport Ministry promises economic benefits, a cleaner environment, and thousands of jobs.

Key Highlights of the Vehicle Scrappage Policy

- Personal vehicles older than 20 years and commercial vehicles older than 15 years will have to undergo a fitness test at the government registered 'Automated Fitness Centres'.
- **Private vehicles older than 20 years and commercial vehicles older than 15 years** that fail to pass the fitness test will be de-registered.
- Such vehicles that fail the fitness test or vehicles whose owners fail to renew the registration certificate would be declared "**end-of-life vehicles**".
- The said vehicles shall be scrapped at the authorized scrapping centres.

Incentives:

- Scrapping an old vehicle through one of the registered scrapping centers, buyer will get approx. **4-6% of the ex-showroom price of the new vehicle as an incentive**.
- In addition, the state governments have been advised to offer a rebate of 25% in road tax for private vehicles and 15% for commercial vehicles.
- In addition to this, the vehicle manufacturers will also be advised to offer a 5 percent discount on the purchase of a new vehicle after an individual presents a scrapping certificate.
- The registration fee on the purchase of a new vehicle shall also be waived off.

Significance:

- India's automobile ecosystem is complex, with dominant, legacy motors spanning **fossil-fuel driven vehicles and a nascent EV segment**.
- The industry's share pre-COVID-19 was about **7.5% of GDP** with significant employment generation.
- But it also imposes a **fuel import burden**.
- Vehicle scrappage and replacement is-
 - ✓ a route to **rejuvenate COVID-19-affected economies** by privileging green technologies, notably **electric vehicles (EVs)**, and
 - ✓ an initiative to **achieve net zero emissions** by mid-century under Paris Agreement commitments.
- The scrappage policy will not only help in the **reduction of air pollution by 25 to 30 percent** but will also help in **improving road safety**.
- The scrappage policy would eventually result in the **recycling of numerous metals** and the **cost of raw materials** for the automotive and electronics industry is likely to decrease.
- The scrappage policy will result in the **creation of 35,000 direct jobs**.

Challenges:

- **There is a need for a credible system of automated fitness checking centres** with help from States to assess whether commercial and private vehicles are roadworthy after 15 and 20 years, respectively, as the policy envisages.
- **Enforcement will be key** to get vehicles scrapped once they are found unfit for use and to stop them from moving to smaller towns.
- **States must also come on board** to provide road tax and registration concessions, while the automobile industry may provide genuine discounts on new vehicles.

- ✓ The enforcement of the amended Motor Vehicles Act of 2019 was not a success because States are not entirely on board,
- ✓ The scrappage plan should get states' support, and manufacturers who will benefit from a rise in demand.
- **Replacement of heavy commercial vehicles**, which contribute disproportionately to pollution as 1.7 million vehicles lack fitness certificates, pose the biggest challenge.
 - ✓ Many of these cannot be replaced quickly in the **absence of financial arrangements for small operators**.
- **Failure to prioritise fuel efficiency and enhance taxes on fuel guzzling vehicles** will only repeat the mistakes of vehicle exchange programmes abroad, where full environmental benefits could not be realised, and taxpayers ended up subsidising inefficiency.

The Centre has to arrive at a balance and have incentives that reward manufacturers of vehicles that are the most fuel-efficient. Ecological scrapping, as a concept, must lead to high rates of materials recovery, reduce air pollution, mining and pressure on the environment.

Sops under RODTEP to see delay

Context: The notification of benefit rates payable to exporters under the Remission of Duties and Taxes on Export Products (RODTEP) scheme is expected to take more time as it is facing 'teething issues'.

The Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products (RoDTEP) scheme

- It was announced by Government of India (GOI) in 2019 to **boost exports by allowing reimbursement of taxes and duties**, which are not exempted or refunded under any other scheme in accordance with World Trade Organization (WTO) norms.
- RoDTEP is a combination of the **current Merchandise Export from India Scheme (MEIS) and Rebate of State and Central Taxes and Levies (RoSCTL)**.
- At present, embedded duties and taxes, which are not refunded under any other scheme, **range from 1-3%**.
- Under the scheme, rebate of these taxes will be given in the form of duty credit/electronic scrip.

Need for the RoDTEP Scheme

- The current **Merchandise Exports from India Scheme (MEIS) scheme** provided additional benefits of **2% to 7% on the FOB value of eligible exports**.
- Objective of the Merchandise Exports from India Scheme (MEIS) is to promote the manufacture and export of notified goods/ products.
- A complaint was filed against India at the WTO (World Trade Organization) by the USA stating that the benefits given to Indian exporters under the MEIS scheme give undue benefits that are against the WTO norms.
- **As per the WTO norms**, a country can't give export subsidies like MEIS if Per capita income is above 1000 US \$ and India's Per Capita Income crossed above 1000 US \$ in 2017.
- India subsequently lost the case at WTO and had to come up with a new WTO compliant scheme to help Indian exporters.
- This led to the birth of the **RoDTEP Scheme**, so as to ensure that India stays WTO-compliant.

Merchandise Exports From India Scheme (MEIS)
Scheme : April 2015 – Dec 2020

Remission of Duties or Taxes on Export Products
(RoDTEP) Scheme : January 2021 onwards

- MEIS scheme came in Effect on 1st April 2015.
- Additional Incentive on goods export.
- As per WTO MEIS scheme violate global trade norms.
- 2% to 7% on FOB value of Exports.
- The Government allocated Rs 18000 Cr to incentivize initially in FY 2015-16 which went to Rs 40,000 Cr in the FY 2018-19.
- Only 30% of total indirect taxes are refunded under MEIS Scheme.
- Issuance in the form of transferable scrips.
- Scrips obtained in the form of hardcopy or it is downloadable from DGFT Portal.
- The MEIS Scheme covers almost 8000 goods for the incentive.

- RoDTEP scheme will come in effect from January 2021.
- Refund of Indirect taxes on export goods
- RoDTEP Scheme is WTO compliant scheme.
- Rates are not fixed it will be notified soon.
- The Government has allocated Rs 50,000 Cr to incentivize under RoDTEP Scheme and it will cost more 10, 000 Cr .
- 100% refund of indirect taxes on the export products under RoDTEP Scheme.
- Issuance in the form of transferable scrips.
- Scrips will be in the form of transferable duty credit/ electronic scrip which will be maintained in electronic ledger.
- More goods may covered under RoDTEP than the MEIS Scheme

Image source: <https://afleo.com/learn/rodtep-scheme-vs-meis-scheme/>

Suez Canal temporarily halts navigation

The owners of a giant container vessel blocking the Suez Canal said that they were facing “extreme difficulty” refloating it.

- Egypt suspended navigation through one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes.

- The Suez Canal Authority (SCA) said it was trying to refloat the Panama-flagged MV Ever Given, a 400-metre-long vessel that veered off course and ran aground in a sandstorm on Tuesday.

Impact on global trade:

- The blockage has already **hit world oil markets**. Crude futures surged 6% as traders assessed the likely impact on deliveries.
- It is an “absolutely critical” route because “**all traffic arriving from Asia goes through the Suez Canal**”.
- Nearly 19,000 ships passed through the canal last year carrying more than one billion tonnes of cargo, according to the SCA.

Suez Canal

- Suez Canal is a sea-level waterway running north-south across the Isthmus of Suez in Egypt.
- It connects the **Mediterranean and the Red seas**.
- The canal separates the African continent from Asia.
- It provides the **shortest maritime route between Europe and the lands lying around the Indian and western Pacific oceans**.
- It is one of the world's most **heavily used shipping lanes**.
- Egypt earned \$5.61 billion in revenues from the canal in 2020.

History of Suez Canal

- The Suez Canal is actually the first canal that directly links the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea.
- It was opened for navigation on the 17 th of November 1869.
- **Egypt nationalized the canal on the 26 th of July 1956.**
- The Canal was closed five times; the last time was the most serious one since it lasted for 8 years.
- The Canal was then reopened for navigation on the 5 th of June 1975.

Suez Crisis:

- **Suez Crisis, (1956)** was an **international crisis in the Middle East**.
- **It precipitated on July 26, 1956, when the Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal.**
- The **canal** had been owned by the **Suez Canal Company**, which was controlled by French and British interests.

Supreme Court backs Tata Sons

The Supreme Court verdict in the Tata-Mistry clarified on the larger issue of the rights of minority shareholders and board representation.

Background:

- The Supreme Court ruled set aside a **National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT)** decision to reinstate minority shareholder Cyrus Mistry, as its Executive Chairman.
- The court has also rejected the plea against the conversion of Tata Sons into a private company, which will have a bearing on other companies which plan to go private.
- In October 2016, Mistry was removed from the Tata chairman's post by a majority of the board of directors.
- Mistry challenged this ouster at the Mumbai bench of the National Company Law tribunal (NCLT), alleging, also, oppression of minority shareholders.
- The challenge was dismissed by the NCLT in 2017.
- Mistry appealed to the NCLAT. It declared his removal "illegal", and ordered his reinstatement.
- Subsequently, Tata Sons challenged the NCLAT order before the Supreme Court.

Key points:

- The ouster of Mr. Mistry not only as Executive Chairman but also Director was justified.
- The Court has held that **minority shareholders are not automatically entitled to a seat on the board of a private company**, there is no statutory obligation.
- The verdict has brought about more clarity on the **rights of minority shareholders in private companies**.
- The ruling distinguishes between **"small shareholders" and "minority shareholders"**.
 - ✓ Under the Companies Act, "small shareholders" are defined as those with shares of a nominal value of not more than Rs 20,000 or any other prescribed sum.
 - ✓ Section 151 of the Companies Act 2013 recommends that listed companies have one director elected by small shareholders, not minority shareholders.
- **Small shareholder:** The Mistry group which holds an 18.4 per cent stake in Tata Sons, is not a "small shareholder" but a "minority shareholder" according to the verdict.
 - ✓ The right to claim proportionate representation is not available even to a minority shareholder statutorily, both under the 1956 Act and under the 2013 Act.
 - ✓ It is available only to a small shareholder, which S.P. Group is certainly not.
- **Voting rights:** The Tata Sons' Articles of Association had allowed for the two Tata trusts to nominate one-third of the directors on the Tata Sons board.
 - ✓ These nominee directors were vested with affirmative voting rights which are effectively veto rights on specified matters.
 - ✓ The Court also examined the issue of these affirmative voting rights.
 - ✓ However, upon examination, it upheld the validity of the affirmative voting rights.

No interest cut on small savings

The finance ministry has withdrawn its decision to slash interest rates on small savings schemes like the Public Provident Fund and the National Savings Certificate (NSC), terming it an "oversight".

- The rates on such schemes will continue to remain as they were during the January-March quarter, reversing the cut on interest rates of up to 110 basis points or 1.1 percentage points announced a day earlier.
- This was one of the biggest reductions after the interest rate unchanged for longest period.

The small savings schemes

- It comprises 12 instruments including the National Saving Certificate (NSC), Public Provident Fund (PPF), Kisan Vikas Patra (KVP) and Sukanya Samridhi Scheme.
- The government resets the interest rate at the beginning of every quarter.
- Since 2016, interest rate resetting has been done based on yields of government securities of the corresponding maturity with some spread on the scheme for senior citizens, as advised by the Shyamala Gopinath Committee.
- However, in practice, the interest rate changes are made considering several other factors, including political ones.

Public Provident Fund (PPF)

- A Public Provident Fund or PPF is a long-term tax-saving instrument that gives a fixed rate of interest annually on the amount that you invested during the year.
- It has a lock-in period of 15 years.
- In a PPF account, the interest you earn is tax-free and the amount that is deposited during the financial year can be claimed under Section 80C.
- Following the finance minister's announcement earlier in the day, the interest rate on PPF rolls back to 7.1 per cent which gets compounded annually.

National Savings Certificate (NSC)

- A National Savings Certificate or NSC has **tenure of five years** and comes with a **fixed rate of interest**.
- The interest rate available on NSC is 6.8 per cent which is compounded annually but payable at maturity.

Sukanya Samriddhi Account Scheme

- Sukanya Samriddhi Account Scheme also known as Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana is a savings scheme launched back in 2015 as part of the "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" initiative by the government.
- It can only be opened by the natural or legal guardian of a **girl child aged below 10 years**.
- The account **matures on completion of 21 years from the date of opening**.
- In case, where the marriage of the account holder takes place before completion of a period of 21 years, the operation of the account shall not be permitted beyond the date of her marriage.
- **A minimum of Rs 1,000 and a maximum of Rs 1.5 lakh can be invested** in this scheme in a financial year.
- Presently, it provides an **interest of 7.6 per cent compounded annually**.

Kisan Vikas Patra

- Kisan Vikas Patra is a savings scheme available at the India Post Office in the form of certificates.
- It is a fixed rate small savings scheme that doubles your investment after a predetermined period of time (presently 124 months at an interest of 6.9 per cent).

Senior Citizen Savings Scheme

- Senior Citizen Savings Scheme offers a regular income with the highest safety and tax-saving benefits.
- It is available for those over 60 years of age. It provides tax deduction of up to Rs 1.5 lakh under Section 80C.
- At present, it offers 7.4 per cent which is compounded quarterly and paid.

India asks state refiners to review oil import contracts with Saudi

The government has told Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL) to look for oil supplies from outside the Middle East region and use collective bargaining power to get favourable terms.

- Purchase contracts with Saudi permit refiners to vary volumes by month but the overall annual commitment must be honoured.

Background:

- **The Middle East accounts for 60% of all oil bought by India** while Latin America and Africa are the other big supplier blocks.
- Due to its **geographical proximity**, the Middle East supplies cargoes in less time and at low freight rates.
- India imports 85% of its oil needs. India is the world's third-largest consumer of oil.
- It is often **vulnerable to global supply and price shocks**.
- Oil producers cartel OPEC output cut to boost oil prices has been at the heart of recent tensions between India and Saudi Arabia.
- When oil prices started to rise, India wanted Saudi Arabia to relax output controls.
- Saudi and its allies ignored India's call to increase supply last month.
- This has led to the Indian government now pressing for diversification of the supply base.

Producers' cartel dictating pricing and contractual terms

- Traditionally, **Saudi Arabia and other OPEC** producers have been our mainstay suppliers of crude oil.
- But their terms have often been **loaded against the buyer**.
- Indian firms buy two-third of their purchases on term or fixed annual contracts.
- These term contracts provide assured supplies of the contracted quantity but the pricing and other terms favour only the supplier.
- While buyers have an obligation to lift all of the contracted quantity, Saudi and other producers have the option to reduce supplies in case OPEC decides to keep production artificially lower to boost prices.
- The buyer has to indicate at least six weeks in advance of their intention to lift quantity out of the annual term contract in any month and has to pay an average official price announced by the producer.
- In an ideal market, the pricing should be of the day when the loading is taking place.

- **Official selling price:** That way India can get the advantage of any drop in international oil rates. But that is not the case. Saudi and other OPEC suppliers insist on selling at their official selling price only.

Possible options for India

- Indian refiners will look to **reduce the quantity** they buy through term contracts and instead buy more from the spot or current market.
- **Buying from the spot market** would ensure that India can take advantage of any fall in prices on any day and book quantities.
 - Indian refiners have raised spot purchases from 20% a decade back to 30-35% of the total oil bought now.
- India wants **pricing flexibility as well as the certainty of supply** even during times when production falls due to any reason.
- **Alternative oil exporters:** In recent months, India has bought more oil from the U.S. and from newer sources such as Guyana, which has a large Indian diaspora.

OPEC

It is a **permanent, intergovernmental organization**, headquartered in **Vienna**, Austria.

- **Founder Members:** The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was **founded in Baghdad**, Iraq, with the signing of an agreement in September **1960** by **five** countries namely Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela. They were to become the Founder Members of the Organization.
- Currently, the Organization has a total of **14 Member** Countries.
- **OPEC's objective is**
 - ✓ to coordinate and unify petroleum policies among Member Countries, in order to secure fair and stable prices for petroleum producers;
 - ✓ an efficient, economic and regular supply of petroleum to consuming nations; and
 - ✓ a fair return on capital to those investing in the industry.
- **OPEC membership is open to any country that is a substantial exporter of oil** and which shares the ideals of the organization.

In 7-member CBDT, four posts are vacant; two other members are on extension

A delay in appointing members of the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), the apex body of the Income Tax Department, is puzzling the entire revenue service and tax bureaucracy.

- The Department of Economic Affairs Secretary has been handling the additional charge of the Department of Revenue after the previous Finance Secretary retired in February.
- In January, the Committee of Secretaries (CoS) shortlisted names for CBDT members from 10 contenders.
- It sent them to the government for approval.
- However, there appears to be no progress in the appointment process.

The Central Board of Direct Taxes

- The Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) is the authority vested with the responsibility of the administration of laws related to direct taxes through the Department of Income Tax.
- It is a **statutory authority** functioning under the Central Board of Revenue Act, 1963.
- CBDT functions as a division of the **Ministry of Finance under the Department of Revenue**.

Composition and Functions of CBDT

- The Central Board of Direct Taxes consists of a Chairman and six Members
- Its functions include formulation of policies, dealing with matters relating to levy and collection of direct taxes, and supervision of the functioning of the entire Income Tax Department.
- CBDT also proposes legislative changes in direct tax enactments and changes in rates and structure of taxation in tune with the policies of the Government.

Railways completes arch closure of Chenab bridge

The Railways said it had completed the arch closure of the 1315m Chenab bridge, the world's highest railway bridge.

- This was one of the most difficult parts of the bridge over Chenab.
- This achievement is a major leap towards the completion of the 111-km-long winding stretch from Katra to Banihal.

About

- The Chenab bridge is part of the **Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla rail link project (USBRL)** and completion of the steel arch is an important construction milestone.
- The Chenab Bridge is a railway bridge currently under construction in the **Bakkal and Kauri in the Reasi district of Jammu and Kashmir**.
- The project is being carried out under the auspices of the **Northern Railways**.
- **Completion time:** It was announced on March 17, 2021. The bridge is expected to be open by December 2021

Features:

- At **359m above the river bed level**, the bridge would be 35 metres higher than the Eiffel Tower in Paris.
- The arch consists of steel boxes, which will be filled with concrete to improve stability.
- The bridge will be able to withstand earthquakes with a magnitude of up to eight and high-intensity blasts.
- The bridge, which will include a 14-metre dual carriageway and a 1.2-metre-wide central verge, will have a **design speed of around 100 kilometres per hour with a lifespan of 120 years**.
- Steel was specifically chosen for the construction of the bridge as it will make the project more economical.

- The metal will also be able to resist temperatures of minus 20 degree Celsius and wind speeds of above 200 kilometre per hour.

Vivad Se Vishwas scheme helped govt gain ₹ 54,005 cr in taxes

The Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) has settled tax disputes in more than 133,000 pleas made under the Vivad Se Vishwas scheme, fetching ₹54,005 crore to the exchequer.

- This is more than a fourth of the 510,000 disputes that existed on 31 January 2020.
- Giving relief to so many taxpayers, including companies, state-owned enterprises and individuals, in a single scheme was a major achievement for the CBDT.

Vivad Se Vishwas scheme:

- The scheme **prescribes immunity** from the institution of any proceeding for prosecution for any offence under the Income-Tax Act in respect of matters covered in the declaration.
- It offers **a complete waiver on interest and penalty to the taxpayers who pay their pending taxes by March 31, 2020.**
- The Direct Tax Vivad se Vishwas Act, 2020 is a separate Act and **not part of the Income-tax Act, 1961 ('Act').**
- The Act intends to bring **both kinds of appeals** — those **filed by taxpayers** and those **filed by the I-T Department** (or when the Department has lost a case).
- **For appeals filed by taxpayers:** if the payment is made by March 31, then the declarant will need to pay the full amount of the disputed tax (and 125 per cent of the disputed tax in cases related to search).
 - ✓ There will be no interest or penalty.
 - ✓ If the dispute relates only to penalty, interest or fee, then only 25 per cent of it is to be paid.
 - ✓ **If the payment is made after March 31 but by June 30**
 - The declarant will need to pay 110 per cent of the disputed tax (135 per cent in case of searches). There will be penalty and interest.
 - If the dispute is only on the penalty, interest or fee, then 30 per cent of it will be required to be paid.
- **For the appeals filed by the I-T Department:** The amount will be halved if the payment is made by March 31.
 - ✓ Here, the declarants will **need to pay 50 per cent of the disputed tax** (62.5 per cent in cases related to searches).
 - ✓ **The penalty and interest will be waived.**
 - ✓ If the matter involves only the interest, penalty or fee, then the declarants will be required to pay only 12.5 per cent of it.
 - ✓ **If the payment is made after March 31 but by June 30**
 - Then the declarant will need to pay 55 percent of the disputed tax (67.5 per cent in search-related cases). There will be **no interest or penalty.**
 - If appeals are related to the disputed penalty, interest or fee, only 15 per cent of it needs to be paid.

Key points:

- The CBDT has raised the **monetary threshold for filing appeals** at all forums starting from appellate tribunals to the Supreme Court to reduce cases getting escalated.
- Among the cases settled under the Vivad Se Vishwas scheme, **2,255 cases belong to central and state government-owned firms and of government agencies** incorporated as boards.
- These accounted for receipts of ₹28,738 crore to the exchequer on settlement
- The total disputed tax covered by all the resolved cases is more than ₹1 trillion.
- The scheme required **payments of only the principal amounts and waiver on interest and penalties.**
- **Private sector companies and individuals** accounted for the remainder of the 133,000 pleas received.
 - ✓ Opting for the scheme was the choice of the individual taxpayer. This was a one-time scheme.
- **Pending cases:** However, **one big challenge** for the government is to deal with the remaining cases, a large number of which are of private sector companies and individuals and cumulatively account for a high amount of tax demand.

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- CBDT also proposes legislative changes in direct tax enactments and changes in rates and structure of taxation in tune with the policies of the Government.

RBI extends fresh support of Rs. 50,000 cr. to NABARD, others

To help mitigate the impact of the pandemic and aid economic revival, the RBI said it would extend fresh support of ₹50,000 crore to the All India Financial Institutions for new lending in FY22.

Key points

- **NABARD** will be provided a **special liquidity facility (SLF)** of ₹25,000 crore for one year to support agriculture and allied activities, the rural non-farm sector and non-banking financial companies-micro finance institutions.
- **SIDBI** will be provided ₹15,000 crore under this facility for up to one year for funding of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs).
- An SLF of ₹10,000 crore will be extended to the **National Housing Bank** for one year to support the housing sector.
- All three facilities will be available at the prevailing policy repo rate.
- Approved a six-month **extension to September 30 for Priority Sector Lending (PSL)** classification for lending by banks to NBFCs for 'on-lending' to sectors that contribute significantly to the economy in terms of export and employment.

- ✓ This would provide an impetus to NBFCs providing credit at the bottom of the pyramid.

Asset Reconstruction Companies (ARCs)

- The RBI said it would constitute a committee to undertake a comprehensive review of the working of ARCs in the financial sector ecosystem.
- It will recommend suitable measures for enabling such entities to meet the growing requirements of the financial sector.
- While ARCs had grown in number and size, their potential for resolving stressed assets was yet to be realised fully.

All India Financial Institutions (AIFI)

- It is a group composed of development finance institutions and investment institutions that play a pivotal role in the financial markets.
- The **development finance institutions or development finance companies** are organizations owned by the government or charitable institution to provide funds for low-capital projects or where their borrowers are unable to get it from commercial lenders.
- There are **four institutions under the jurisdiction of Reserve Bank of India** as all-India Financial Institutions:
 - ✓ Export - Import Bank of India (EXIM Bank)
 - ✓ National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD)
 - ✓ Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI)
 - ✓ National Housing Bank (NHB)

Significance:

- India financial institutions (AIFIs) such as the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) and the National Housing Bank (NHB) play an important role in meeting the long-term funding requirements of agriculture and the rural sector, small industries, housing finance companies, NBFCs and MFIs.
- These All India Financial Institutions raise resources from the market through specified instruments allowed by the Reserve Bank, in addition to relying on their internal sources.

All gold jewellery must bear hallmark

The Centre will go ahead with its plan to mandate hallmarking of gold jewellery from June 1. Currently about 40% of gold jewellery is sold with a hallmark.

What is a hallmark?

- Hallmarking is the accurate determination and official recording of the proportionate content of precious metal in precious metal articles.
- It certifies that the piece of jewellery conforms to a set of standards laid by the **Bureau of Indian Standards, the national standards organization of India.**
- As per this scheme, Registration is granted to the jewellers by BIS under Hallmarking Scheme.
- The BIS certified jewellers can get their jewellery hallmarked from any of the BIS recognized Assaying and Hallmarking Centres.

Components of hallmark: BIS hallmark for gold jewellery consists of several components:

- **Purity in carat and Fineness (any one)**
 - ✓ a) 22K916 – Equal to 22 Carat
 - ✓ b) 18K750 – Equal to 18 Carat
 - ✓ c) 14K585 – Equal to 14 Carat
- **Identification Mark or Number of the Hallmarking Centre's**
- **Identification Mark or number of the Jeweller's**
 - ✓ Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) is authorised to carry out the hallmarking of gold jewellery and any jewellery can apply for a license before getting their jewellery hallmarked from them.
 - ✓ **The BIS (Bureau of Indian standards) Act 2016** has to enable provisions under Section 14 & Section 16 for making hallmarking of gold jewellery and artefacts mandatory by the Central Government.



Image source: IndiaTV

Key points:

- Penal action: As per the new rules, **if jewellery or an artefact made of 14-, 18- or 22-carat gold** is sold without the BIS hallmark, the jeweller could be penalised five times the cost of the object or imprisoned for up to one year.
- **Registration:** The entire process of BIS certification had become automated.
 - ✓ Providing an incentive to start-ups and women entrepreneurs, the BIS had reduced the minimum marking fee by 50%.
 - ✓ So far 34,647 jewellers had registered with the BIS and that in the next two months this number was expected to go up to one lakh.
- **Benefits:**
 - ✓ The principle objectives of the Hallmarking Scheme are to protect the public against adulteration and to obligate manufacturers to maintain legal standards of fineness.
 - ✓ Mandatory hallmarking would protect the public against lower caratage.
 - ✓ It will ensure consumers did not get cheated while buying gold ornaments and got the purity as marked on the ornaments.

What is BIS?

- BIS is the National Standard Body of India established under the BIS Act 2016 for the harmonious development of the activities of standardization, marking and quality certification of goods.

Significance of BIS

- BIS is working towards '**One Nation, One Standard**' to remove multiplicity, duplicacy of efforts and to bring more clarity among consumers, manufacturers and to facilitate trade.

Bureau of Indian standards (BIS) Act 2016

- The Act establishes the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) as the National Standards Body of India.
- The Act has enabled provisions for the Government to bring under compulsory certification regime any goods or articles of any scheduled industry, process, system.
- Enabling provisions have also been made for making hallmarking of precious metal articles mandatory.

India's public debt level among highest in emerging economies'

India's public debt level is among the highest in emerging economies with a quantitative easing programme underway, while its debt affordability is among the weakest.

- **Moody's report** titled, 'Quantitative easing (QE) programs are largely positive, but risks vary across economies', noted this.
- In the report, Moody's **analyzed 11 emerging markets** where central banks have started the largest QE programs — Chile (A1 negative), Colombia (Baa2 negative), Croatia (Ba1 stable), Ghana (B3 negative), Hungary (Baa3 positive), India (Baa3 negative), Indonesia (Baa2 stable), the Philippines (Baa2 stable), Poland (A2 stable), South Africa (Ba2 negative) and Turkey (B2 negative).

Quantitative easing (QE)

- It is a form of monetary policy used by central banks as a method of quickly increasing the domestic money supply and spurring economic activity.
- Quantitative easing usually involves a **country's central bank purchasing longer-term government bonds, as well as other types of assets, such as mortgage-backed securities (MBS).**
- For example: In response to the economic shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, on March 15, 2020, the U.S. Federal Reserve announced a quantitative easing plan of over \$700 billion
- **RBI's QE measures: G-sec acquisition programme – G-SAP**
 - ✓ The announcement of G-SAP 1.0, which promised to buy government bonds worth ₹1 lakh crore from the secondary market in the first quarter of 2021-22 was done mainly to calm bond markets.

Key points:

- Most of the 11 emerging markets have **weak government effectiveness.**
- **High debt levels** may become unsustainable for the more vulnerable economies.
 - ✓ **Debt affordability varies** widely, with Ghana and India [rated Baa3 negative] weakest.
- India, South Africa and Ghana have the highest public debt and weakest debt affordability.
 - ✓ **RBI's QE program:** The Reserve Bank of India's programme aims to stabilise the domestic bond market.
 - ✓ While the bank does not operate in the primary market, dividend payments and transfers of excess reserves to the government fund are part of the budget deficit.
- **Exiting the stimulus is difficult:**
 - ✓ While central banks' QE operations had largely **achieved the aims of stabilising bond markets and providing market liquidity.**
 - ✓ Exiting the monetary stimulus provided during the pandemic would be difficult for all emerging market central banks.
 - ✓ There is a risk that central banks will not taper these programs once they fulfil their primary objectives, unless they are supported by strong fiscal policy frameworks.

India's public debt

- Public debt is the total amount, including total liabilities, borrowed by the government to meet its development budget.
- It has to be paid from the **Consolidated Fund of India.**
- The central government broadly classifies its liabilities into two categories —
 - ✓ debt contracted against the Consolidated Fund of India, and
 - ✓ public account.
- **Internal debt constitutes over 93 per cent** of the overall public debt.
- Internal loans that make up for the bulk of public debt are further divided into two broad categories – **marketable and non-marketable debt.**
- The sources of public debt are dated **government securities (G-Secs), treasury bills, external assistance, and short-term borrowings.**
- According to the Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934, the RBI is both the banker and public debt manager for the government.
- The RBI handles all the money, remittances, foreign exchange and banking transactions.

- The Union government also deposits its cash balance with the RBI.
- The Union government's liabilities account for a little over **46 per cent of India's gross domestic product (GDP)**.
- However, if the public debt is calculated as general government liabilities, which also includes the liabilities of states, this goes up to **68 per cent of the country's GDP**.
- Till 1972, India's general debt—for the Centre and states—rose steadily to about 39% of gross domestic product (GDP) and then fell sharply in 1974.
- After 1996, it saw explosive growth, reaching 57% in 2005. And, in 2018, general debt was approximately 57% of GDP.

U.S. Treasury keeps India on currency watch list

India is one of the 11 countries in the U.S. Treasury's 'Monitoring List' with regard to their currency practices.

- The other 10 countries on the list with India are **China, Japan, Korea, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Mexico**.

About the report

- The report on **Macroeconomic and Foreign Exchange Policies of Major Trading Partners of the United States** is submitted to the U.S. Congress.
- It reviews currency practices of the U.S.'s 20 biggest trading partners.
- It alleged that **foreign economies artificially manipulate their currency values that put American workers at an unfair disadvantage**.

Three criteria are used to review partners:

- a significant (at least \$20 billion) bilateral trade surplus,
- a material current account surplus, and
- 'persistent one-sided intervention' in forex markets.

India met two of the three criteria — the trade surplus criterion and the "persistent, one-sided intervention" criterion, according to the U.S Treasury Department.

Meaning of 'currency manipulator':

- **A label given by the US government:** To countries it feels are engaging in **unfair currency practices** by deliberately devaluing their currency against the dollar.
- **What it signifies:** The country in question is **artificially lowering** the value of its currency to gain an unfair advantage over others.
- **Impact:** This would **reduce the cost of exports from that country** and artificially show a reduction in trade deficits as a result.
- **Parameters used:**
 - ✓ A significant bilateral trade surplus (at least \$20 billion over a 12-month period) with the US.

- ✓ A material current account surplus equivalent to at least 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) over a 12-month period.
- ✓ Persistent, one-sided interventions are conducted repeatedly, in at least six out of 12 months.

An economy meeting two of the above three criteria in the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015 is placed on the Monitoring List.

- **Dent confidence of investors:** The designation of a country as a currency manipulator does not immediately attract any penalties, but tends to dent the confidence about a country in the global financial markets.

WHAT IT MEANS...

For India There will be pressure on RBI to cut down intervention, allow the rupee to appreciate	For economy A stronger rupee would partially offset the impact of rising oil prices on imports
In terms of restrictions The tag does not involve any kind of trade restrictions	For RBI The central bank can increase diversification of its reserves to include non-dollar assets



Exchange rate:

- **Definition:** Exchange rate is the price of one currency in terms of another currency.
- **Description:** Exchange rates can be either fixed or floating. Fixed exchange rates are decided by central banks of a country whereas floating exchange rates are decided by the mechanism of market demand and supply.
 - ✓ The exchange rate for any currency would be determined by the interplay of its demand and supply.
 - ✓ **Depreciation of Indian rupee:** If more Indians want to buy US goods, there would be a higher demand for the dollar relative to the rupee. This, in turn, would mean the dollar would be stronger than the rupee.
 - ✓ **Appreciation of Indian rupee:** If demand for US goods falls, the dollar would depreciate relative to the rupee or the rupee would appreciate relative to the dollar.
 - ✓ **Excessive and undisclosed interventions are considered unfair:** For example, if China's central bank buys dollars in the forex market, it can artificially weaken the yuan and Chinese goods will then become more affordable and competitive in the international market.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

ENVIRONMENT GEOGRAPHY & DISASTER MANAGEMENT



Ken-Betwa River Interlinking Project

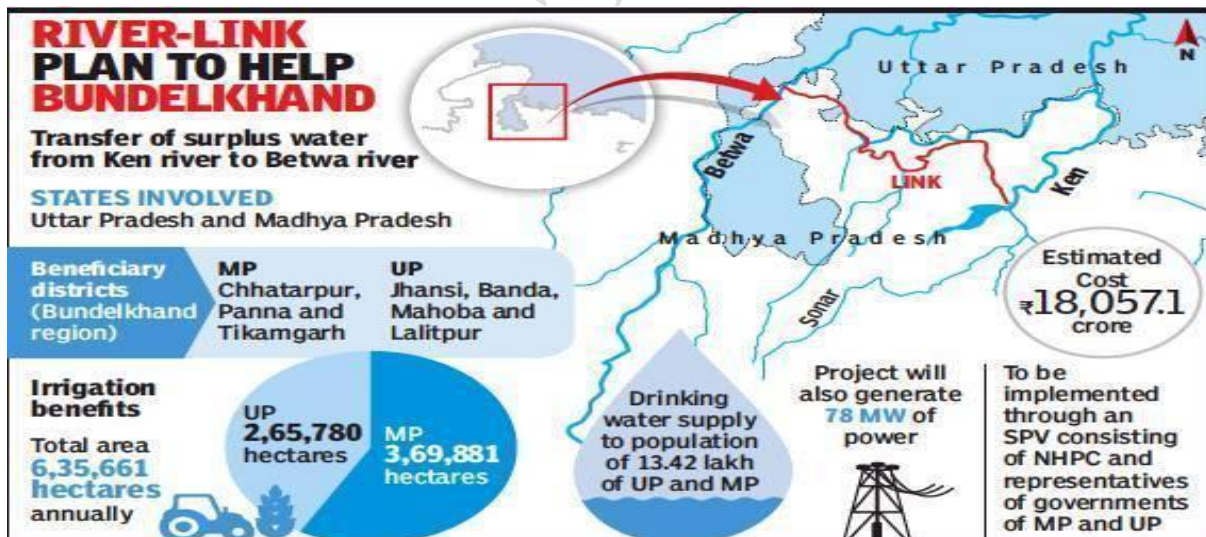
The governments of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have signed an agreement multi-crore project to link the Ken and Betwa rivers.

- It aims to irrigate the water deficient Bundelkhand region (spread over both States) as well as provide electricity.

The Ken is the **last tributary of the Yamuna** before it joins the Ganga — 87% of it lies in Madhya Pradesh and 12% in Uttar Pradesh. **The Betwa is an interstate river that rises in Raisen district of Madhya Pradesh** — 68% of it lies in that state before it flows towards Jhansi district in Uttar Pradesh. **This too is a tributary of the Yamuna.**

About the Project:

- The Ken-Betwa project is **part of the national river linking project**.
 ✓ **National river linking project** proposes to connect 14 Himalayan and 16 peninsular rivers with 30 canals and 3,000 reservoirs in order to irrigate 87 million hectares of land.
- The project involves building a 77-metre tall and a 2-km wide **Dhaudhan dam** and a 230-km canal.
- Originally, this phase envisaged irrigating 6,35,661 hectares annually (3,69,881 ha in M.P. and 2,65,780 ha in U.P.).
- In addition, the project was to provide 49 million cubic metres (MCM) for drinking water supply en route.
- The **Ken-Betwa Project** is a two-part, Rs. 18,000 crore is the first river inter-linking project.
- The project will transfer the surplus water from the **Ken river to the Betwa basin** to help to irrigate the drought-prone **Bundelkhand region** and the adjoining areas.



States involved	Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh
Beneficiary districts	Panna, Chhatarpur and Tikamgarh (MP) & Banda, Mahoba, Lalitpur and Jhansi (UP).
Irrigation benefits	Total areas 6,35,661 hectares annually
Power generation	78 MW
Funding	Centre (90%) and States (10%)
Estimated cost	Rs. 18,057 crore
Implementing Agency	Ministry of Water Resources

Why the Ken-Betwa Linking?

- **Scarcity of water:** The region of Betwa experience acute scarcity of water for agricultural industrial and domestic use.
- **Varied Water Sources:** Water sources are varied and often seasonal, ranging from ponds, tanks, lakes and streams to open wells, bore wells and irrigation canal radiating out from large-small dams.
- **Dependency on Monsoon Recharge:** Farmers are highly dependent on the monsoon to recharge these wells.
- **Irrigation:** The Ken-Betwa interlinking project aims to diverge the surplus waters of Ken basin to water deficit Betwa basin.

Know the Hurdles:

- This ambitious project has received almost all the major clearances, had hit a roadblock when **MP objected to it.**
- The state has raised the **concern of sharing of water of the project.** Both the states involved are in dispute over how they will share the water.
- A large part of **Panna (a National Park, declared tiger reserve in 1994 under Project Tiger)** is going to be diverted for the Ken-Betwa interlinking project.

Major Concerns:

- More about 20000 people in 38 villages will be affected due to the submergence by **Daudhan reservoir and Makodia reservoir.**
- The project will submerge 6,221 hectares of land— 4,141 hectares of it is core forest inside the reserve.

- It will submerge about 10% of the **Panna Tiger Reserve** in Madhya Pradesh which has been feted as a model tiger-conservation reserve.
- The tiger habitat, vulture nests, and the gharial - the iconic fish-eating crocodile - all of which are in danger of extinction in the region will be endangered by the construction of Daudhan dam.
- Some experts have even questioned the definition of the Ken as water surplus and Betwa as deficit in comparison.

The **NBWL Standing Committee** has put some conditions on the project. These are:

- Compensating direct loss of 105 sq km of tiger habitat: For this Nauradehi, Rani Durgavati and Ranipur wildlife sanctuaries will be integrated with Panna Tiger Reserve.
- Affected villagers to be rehabilitated at the project's cost.
- The dam reservoir area to be retained as core tiger reserve with minimum activities.
- No fishing to be allowed at the dam site.
- No new mining leases to be allowed on tiger dispersal routes.
- A landscape-based plan for the area will be finalized with the National Tiger Conservation Authority assisted by WII, state forest department and the project proponent

Explained: Why forest fires break out in the spring

Uttarakhand has witnessed over 1,000 incidents of forest fire over the last six months. At least five persons and seven animals have been reported killed.

- April-May is the season when forest fires take place in various parts of the country.
- But forest fires have been more frequent than usual in Uttarakhand and have also taken place during winter.
- Dry soil caused by a weak monsoon is being seen as one of the causes.

Recent fire incidents:

- Prolonged fires occurred in **Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh (Kullu Valley)** and **Nagaland-Manipur border (Dzukou Valley)**, the Simlipal National Park in Odisha, Bandhavgarh Forest Reserve in Madhya Pradesh, and in sanctuaries for the Asiatic lion and the great Indian bustard in Gujarat.

Forest cover in India

- As of 2019, about **21.67% (7,12,249 sq km)** of the country's geographical area is identified as forest, according to the India State of Forest Report 2019 (ISFR) released by the Forest Survey of India (FSI), Dehradun.
- **Tree cover** makes up another 2.89% (95, 027 sq km).

Significance:

- **Fights climate change:** Forests play an important role in mitigation and adaptation to climate change.

- ✓ They act as a sink, reservoir and source of carbon. A healthy forest stores and sequesters more carbon than any other terrestrial ecosystem.
- **Provide livelihoods:** In India, with 1.70 lakh villages in close proximity to forests (Census 2011), the livelihood of several crores of people is dependent on fuelwood, bamboo, fodder, and small timber.

Vulnerability to fire

- **Forests of the Northeast and central India regions** are the most vulnerable areas to forest fires, the FSI has said.
- **States with large forest areas under the 'very highly prone' category** include Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Odisha, Maharashtra, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Western Maharashtra, Southern Chhattisgarh and areas of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.
- Areas under the 'highly prone' and 'moderately prone' categories make up about **26.2% of the total forest cover**.

Causes: Forest fires can be caused by a number of natural causes, but many major fires in India are triggered mainly by human activities.

- Fires of longer duration, increasing intensity, higher frequency and highly inflammable nature are all being linked to **climate change**.
- Under natural circumstances, **extreme heat and dryness, friction created by rubbing of branches** with each other also have been known to initiate fire.
- In Uttarakhand, **the lack of soil moisture** too is being seen as a key factor.
- **Poor monsoons:** In two consecutive monsoon seasons (2019 and 2020), rainfall has been deficient by 18% and 20% of the seasonal average, respectively.
- **Wind speed and direction** play a critical role in bringing a forest fire under control. The fire often spreads in the direction of the winds and towards higher elevations.

Govt. initiatives:

- The FSI developed the **Forest Fire Alert System** to monitor forest fires in real time. In its advanced version launched in January 2019, the system
- Real-time fire information from identified fire hotspots is gathered using **MODIS sensors** (1km by 1km grid) and electronically transmitted to FSI.
- This information is then relayed via email at state, district, circle, division, range, beat levels. Users of this system in the locality are issued **SMS alerts**.

Concerns:

- **Degrades flora and fauna:** Forest fires can have multiple adverse effects on the forest cover, soil, tree growth, vegetation, and the overall flora and fauna.
 - ✓ Heat generated during the fire destroys animal habitats.
 - ✓ **Soil quality decreases** with the alteration in their compositions. Soil moisture and fertility, too, is affected. Thus forests can shrink in size.
- **Difficult to control:** The locality of the forest and access to it pose hurdles in initiating firefighting efforts.
 - ✓ During peak season, shortage of staff is another challenge in dispatching firefighting teams.

Timely mobilisation of forest staff, fuel and equipment, depending on the type of fire, through the thick forests remain challenges.

Implementing green contracts

The increasing concerns about climate change once again point to the need for enhanced efforts towards achieving sustainable growth goals in India.

Need for sustainable growth:

- As both consumers and corporations reap the benefits of large-scale manufacturing and services.
- They must equally share the responsibilities relating to the loss of resources and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- They can contribute to cutting down emissions through the process of green contracting.

Green contracts

- 'Green contracts' are commercial contracts which mandate that **contracting parties cut down greenhouse gas emissions at different stages of delivery** of goods/services, including design, manufacturing, transportation, operations and waste disposal, as applicable to the industry.
- A **'green tender'** defines necessary 'green qualifications', which can be considered when awarding the contract to a bidder.
- These green qualifications can range from
 - ✓ using a pre-defined percentage of 'green energy' in service delivery to adequate on-site waste management,
 - ✓ reducing carbon emissions by a certain level over period of time, etc.
- The **'green obligations'**: It is this obligatory nature of green contracts which sets the tone for the parties to cut down emissions.
 - ✓ This can be achieved by contractual clauses providing for the
 - ✓ use of good quality and energy-efficient infrastructure for production of goods/services,
 - ✓ efforts in day-to-day operations such as reducing noise, air and water pollution and
 - ✓ ensuring eco-friendly means of transportation like bicycles on site,
 - ✓ establishing and maintaining a sustainable waste management system, and so on.

Way forward:

- **Meeting obligations:** The govt. should provide for measurement criteria and audit of the performance of the contractor with regard to these obligations.
 - ✓ An organisation may also choose to contractually highlight non-performance of such obligations as a ground of contractual breach, with penalty prescriptions.
 - ✓ The service recipients can also themselves undertake thorough assessments on their current standing on greenhouse gas emissions, and initiate relevant processes to contribute their share in India's green sustainable future.

The economic cost of executing green contracts may be greater than a normal brown contract, but global entities operating in a changing environment need to take into consideration the greater environment costs at stake.

Meghalaya records India's first bat with sticky disks

Meghalaya has yielded India's first bamboo-dwelling bat with sticky disks, taking the species count of the flying mammal in the country to 130.

- A team of scientists from the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) and a few European natural history museums found it.

The disk-footed bat (*Eudiscopus denticulus*)

- The **disk-footed bat** (*Eudiscopus denticulus*) is a species of vesper bat in the Vespertilionidae family found in Laos and Myanmar.
- The disc-footed bat was recorded in the Northeastern Indian state's (Meghalaya).
- It was recorded in the North-eastern State's Lailad area near the **Nongkhylllem Wildlife Sanctuary**.
- The newly-recorded bat was presumed to be a **bamboo-dwelling species**.
- Its **flattened skull and adhesive pads** helped in identifying it as the disk-footed known from specific localities in southern **China, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar**.
 - ✓ The flattened skull and sticky pads enabled the bats to roost inside cramped spaces, clinging to smooth surfaces such as bamboo internodes.
- The disk-footed bat was also found to be **genetically very different from all other known bats bearing disk-like pads**.
- Scientists analysed the **very high frequency echolocation calls** of the disk-footed bat, which was suitable for orientation in a cluttered environment such as inside bamboo groves.

Significance

- The disk-footed bat has raised Meghalaya's bat count to 66, the most for any State in India.
- It has also helped add a genus and species to the bat fauna of India, the ZSI scientists said.

The Nongkhylllem Wildlife Sanctuary (NWS)

- It is located near Lailad village in the Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya and covers an area of 29 square kilometres.
- The animals here include the Bengal tiger, the black bear, the leopard and many such species at the verge of extinction such as the necked hornbill and the brown hornbill bird.

The net-zero goal & India

The 'Leaders' Climate Summit' is to be organised by the United States this week (April 22-23).

Background:

- The **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 1.5°C report** called for global carbon emissions to reach net-zero by 2050.
- Climate diplomacy has transformed it into a call for all countries to announce 2050 as the net-zero target year.

The net-zero goal

- Net-zero, which is also referred to as **carbon-neutrality**, does not mean that a country would bring down its emissions to zero.
- Net-zero is a state in which a **country's emissions are compensated by absorption and removal of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere.**
- **Absorption of the emissions** can be increased by creating more **carbon sinks such as forests.**
- **Removal of gases** from the atmosphere requires futuristic technologies such as carbon capture and storage.
- This way, it is even possible for a country to have negative emissions, if the absorption and removal exceed the actual emissions.
- A good example is **Bhutan which is often described as carbon-negative because it absorbs more than it emits.**

India's position

- India is a **climate-vulnerable country**. So limiting global temperature rise, ideally below 1.5°C will be beneficial for it also.
- Though India is a large economy, we are still a **very poor country with a significant development deficit.**
- Our **per-capita carbon emissions** are less than half the world average.
- Announcing an **Indian 2050 net-zero commitment** risks taking on a much heavier burden of decarbonisation than many wealthier countries.
- It could seriously compromise India's development needs.

India's objections

- **Impact on India:** India's emissions are likely to grow at the fastest pace in the world, as it presses for higher growth to pull hundreds of millions of people out of poverty.
 - ✓ No amount of afforestation or reforestation would be able to compensate for the increased emissions.
- **Emphasis on Paris Agreement:** India has been arguing that instead of opening up a parallel discussion on net-zero targets outside of the Paris Agreement framework, countries must focus on delivering on what they have already promised.
 - ✓ The net-zero goal does not figure in the 2015 Paris Agreement, the new global architecture to fight climate change.
 - ✓ India is the only G-20 country whose climate actions are compliant to the Paris Agreement goal of keeping global temperatures from rising beyond 2°C.
- **Developed nations' non deliverances:** New Delhi also repeatedly points to the fact that the developed nations have never delivered on their past promises and commitments.

Way forward: India should take into account the history of global climate negotiations and its own developmental needs.

- **Near-term sectoral transformations** through aggressive adoption of technologies that are within our reach. It can avoid high carbon lock-ins.
 - ✓ Focusing on sectoral low-carbon development pathways that combine competitiveness, job-creation, distributional justice and low pollution in key areas where India is already changing rapidly.

- **De-carbonise power sector**
 - ✓ The electricity sector is the single largest source (about 40%) of India's greenhouse gas emissions.
 - ✓ Decarbonised electricity would allow India to undertake transformational changes in urbanisation and industrial development.
 - ✓ It can expand the use of electricity for transport, and by integrating electric systems into urban planning.
- **Ceiling for coal power**
 - ✓ Coal provides firm, dispatchable power and accounts for roughly 75% of electricity today.
 - ✓ It supports the economy of key regions; and is tied to sectors such as banking and railways.
 - ✓ India should pledge that it will not grow its coal-fired power capacity beyond what is already announced, and reach peak coal electricity capacity by 2030.
 - ✓ It should strive to make coal-based generation cleaner and more efficient.
 - ✓ Coal is increasingly uneconomic and phasing it out over time will bring local gains, such as reduced air pollution, aside from climate mitigation.
- **Create a multi-stakeholder Just Transition Commission** representing all levels of government and the affected communities to ensure decent livelihood opportunities beyond coal in India's coal belt.
 - ✓ This is necessary because the transition costs of a brighter low-carbon future should not fall on the backs of India's poor.
 - ✓ Addressing the **poor finances and management of distribution companies**, requires deep changes and overcoming entrenched interests.
 - ✓ There is a need for electricity storage, smart grids, and technologies that enable the electrification of other sectors such as transportation.
 - ✓ Through careful partnership with the private sector, including tools such as production-linked incentives, India should use the electricity transition to aim for job creation and global competitiveness in these key areas.
- **Improve energy services**
 - ✓ Enhancing the efficiency of electricity use is an important complement to decarbonising electricity supply.
 - ✓ **Growing urbanisation and uptake of electricity services** offer a good opportunity to shape energy consumption within buildings through proactive measures.
 - ✓ **Cooling needs:** Air conditioners, fans and refrigerators together consume about 60% of the electricity in households.
 - ✓ India could set aggressive targets of, say, 80% of air conditioner sales, and 50% of fan and refrigerator sales in 2030, being in the most efficient bracket.
 - ✓ In addition to **reducing green house gas emissions**, this would have the benefit of **lowering consumer electricity bills**.
- **Forming timelines:** This would allow India adequate time to undertake detailed assessments of
 - ✓ its development needs and low-carbon opportunities,
 - ✓ the possible pace of technological developments,
 - ✓ the seriousness of the net-zero actions by developed countries, and
 - ✓ potential geo-political and geo-economic risks of over-dependence on certain countries for technologies or materials.

Such a sector-by-sector approach allows India to nimbly adapt its sectoral transition plans as technologies mature and enable it to ratchet up its pledges periodically as required by the Paris Agreement.

Importance of International Day of Forests and why do we celebrate it?

Every year the United Nations observes March 21 as the International Day of Forests to commemorate the green cover around the world and reiterate its importance in the world.

More on the news

- The theme of this year's International Day of Forests celebration is "Forest restoration: a path to recovery and well-being".
- The decision to mark March 21 as International Day of Forests was taken in 2012 to commemorate and raise awareness about the significance of all types of forests.
- This day reminds us about the importance of forests in the lives of the living creatures.

Significance of International Day of Forests

- It provides an opportunity for the countries to look at the condition of their forests and amount of green cover in the country and take required actions in this context.
- It is an opportunity to realise that the sustainable development of forests along with judicious use of their resources is the primary way to combat climate change and contribute to the prosperity and well-being of present and future generations.
- Forests have an important role to play in the eradication of poverty in the countries and can help in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- Though the forests provide us with unmeasured ecological, economic, social, and health benefits, still global deforestation and several other threats to them continue at an alarming rate.

How is the International Day of Forests celebrated?

- According to the official website of the UN, the Day celebrates and raises awareness regarding the importance of all types of forests.
- On this day, countries are encouraged to undertake local, national and international efforts to organize activities involving forests and trees, such as tree-planting campaigns.
- It is celebrated by the UN Forum on Forests and the Food and Agricultural Organisation, in collaboration with the governments, the Collaborative Partnership on Forests and other relevant organisations in this area.

International Day of Forests: Theme

- Every year, the Collaborative Partnership on Forest (which is an arm of the United Nations Forum on Forests) decides on a theme for the forest day. The International Day of Forests 2021 theme has been declared as "Forest restoration: a path to recovery and well-being".
- According to the official video promo of the day, "when we take a step to restore forests, we take a part in something much bigger."
- This year's theme encourages replanting and recreating lost forests to return lost habitats to millions of plants and animals.

India prepares to welcome cheetahs from Africa

The Supreme Court in 2020 lifted its seven year stay on a proposal to introduce African cheetahs from Namibia into the Indian habitat on an experimental basis. The court allowed the re-introduction of cheetahs into the Palpur Kuno Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh on an experimental basis.

More on the news

Nearly 70 years after the cheetah was officially declared locally extinct or extirpated, India will receive its first batch of the large cats from Africa by the end of this year.

- Within a week's time two expert teams one from Namibia and the other from South Africa, both the countries having the highest populations of cheetah in the world, will arrive to train Indian forest officers and wildlife experts on handling, breeding, rehabilitation, medical treatment and conservation of the animals.
- This is the first time in the world that a large carnivore will be relocated from one continent to the other.
- **The animal is believed to have disappeared from India** when Maharaja Ramanuj Pratap Singh Deo of Koriya, Chhattisgarh hunted and shot the last three recorded Asiatic cheetahs in India in **1947**.
- The cheetah was **officially declared extinct** by the Government of India in 1952.
- While the current relocation attempt of cheetahs began in 2009, it is only last year that the Supreme Court of India gave the green signal to the centre to do so.
- An expert committee set up by the ministry of environment forests and climate change under the chairmanship of Wildlife Trust of India member and former Director Wildlife of the Indian Government has completed an assessment on the sites for relocation.

Cheetahs in India

- The cheetah or the **Acinonyx jubatus**, is one of the oldest of the big cat species, with ancestors that can be traced back more than five million years to the Miocene era.
- The cheetahs are also the **world's fastest land mammal**, an icon of nature.
- Until the 20th century, the Asiatic cheetah was quite common and ranged all the way from Israel, the Arabian Peninsula to Iran, Afghanistan and India. In India it ranged as far South as the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu.
- **The Asiatic cheetah** also known as the hunting leopard in India was kept by Kings and Princes to hunt gazelle; the Mughal emperor Akbar kept them for hunting gazelle and blackbucks.
- Trapping of large numbers of adult Indian cheetahs, who had already learned hunting skills for wild mothers, for assisting in Royal hunts is said to be one of the major causes for the rapid decline of the species in India.

CAUSES OF EXTINCTION OF THE INDIAN/ ASIATIC CHEETAH FROM INDIA

- Cheetahs were very easy to tame: they were often trained to race down and hunt animals, almost like a hound so they were caught in large numbers for use in such hunts.
- For cheetahs it was nearly impossible to breed in captivity.
- Deforestation
- Excess hunting

Cheetah reintroduction programme in India

- The Wildlife Institute of India at Dehradun had prepared a ₹260-crore cheetah reintroduction project six years ago.
- It was estimated that an amount of ₹25 crore to ₹30 crore would be needed to build an enclosure in an area of 150 sq km for the cheetahs in Nauradehi.
- The proposal was to put the felines in the enclosure with huge boundary walls before being released in the wild, he said.
- Nauradehi Sanctuary was found to be the most suitable area for the reintroduction of the cheetahs as its forests are not very dense and can restrict the fast movement of the spotted cat. Besides, the prey base for cheetahs is also available in abundance at the sanctuary.
- According to the earlier action plan, around 20 cheetahs were to be translocated to Nauradehi from Namibia in Africa.
- The Namibia Cheetah Conservation Fund had then shown its willingness to donate the felines to India. However, the State was not ready to finance the plan contending that it was the Centre's project.

POSSIBLE SITES OF RE INTRODUCTION

The wildlife experts have currently shortlisted 3 regions which have the potential to support the cheetah populations. These include:

- The Nauradehi wildlife sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh**
- The Kuno Palpur wildlife sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh**
- The Shahgarh bulge landscape, Jaisalmer, Rajasthan**

PROTECTION STATUS OF CHEETAH

- **AFRICAN CHEETAH**
 - IUCN STATUS- Vulnerable
 - CITES Status- Appendix I i.e. migratory species that have been assessed as being in danger of extinction throughout the world or a significant portion of their range.
 - Habitat- Around 6,500-7,000 African cheetahs present in the wild. 40-50 found only in Iran.
 - Physical Characteristics- Bigger in size as compared to Asiatic Cheetah.
- **ASIATIC CHEETAH**
 - IUCN STATUS- critically endangered
 - CITERs status- Appendix I of the list
 - Habitat- 40- 50 found only in Iran
 - Physical Characteristics- Smaller and paler than the African cheetah. Has more fur, a smaller head and a longer neck. Usually have red eyes and they have a more cat-like appearance.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND DEVELOPMENT



How to treat unpaid work

Women everywhere carry a disproportionately higher burden of unpaid work, namely, unpaid domestic services as well as unpaid care of children, the old and the disabled for their respective households.

- The **demand for wages for housewives** has emerged from this concern.

Concerns with unpaid work:

- **Drudgery:** This work is a repetitive 24-hour job without remuneration, promotions or retirement benefits.
- **Patriarchy:** It is imposed on women by patriarchal norms.
- **This unequal division of unpaid work** between women and men is unfair and unjust and it deprives women of equal opportunities as men. **It restricts opportunities** for women in the economy and in life.
- **Ignored in national policies:** This work contributes to overall well-being at the household level and collectively at the national level. But it is invisible in the national database and in national policies.

Linkages between unpaid work and the economy

- **GDP contribution:** Unpaid work is a **privately produced public good** which is critical for the sustenance of the mainstream economy. The household produces goods and services for its members.
 - ✓ GDP is a measure of the total production and consumption of the economy, it has to incorporate this work by accepting the household as a sector of the economy.
- **Unpaid work subsidises the private sector** by providing it a generation of workers (human capital) and takes care of wear and tear of labour who are family members.
 - ✓ **Saves capital:** The private sector would have paid much higher wages and earned lower profits in the absence of unpaid work.
- **Unpaid work subsidises the government** by taking care of the old, sick and the disabled.
 - ✓ The state would have spent huge amounts in the absence of unpaid work.

Wages for housewives

- Its implementation may create problems such as **affordability of the government and calculation of the amounts.**
- Women may not be eager to enter the labour market.
- These wages may confirm unpaid work as women's work only, which would deny opportunities to women in the wider world.

Way forward: This work, therefore, needs to be integrated with the mainstream economy and policies.

- **Payment of pension** to old women (60+ years) may be a better idea to compensate them for their unpaid work.
- **National Database:** Governments should recognise this unpaid work in the national database by a sound time-use survey and use the data in national policies.
- **Public policy:** Public policies should focus on improving the productivity of unpaid workers, reduce their burden, and tap their potential in development, as the household could also be an important economic sector.
- **Social infrastructure:** Governments can relieve women's burden of unpaid work by
 - ✓ improving technology (e.g. better fuel for cooking),
 - ✓ better infrastructure (e.g. water at the doorstep),

- ✓ shifting some unpaid work to the mainstream economy (e.g. childcare, care of the disabled, and care of the chronically sick), and
- ✓ by making basic services (e.g. health and transportation) accessible to women.
- **Redistribute the work between men and women** by providing different incentives and disincentives to men.
 - ✓ For example mandatory training of men in housework, childcare, etc. and financial incentives for sharing housework.
 - ✓ These measures will give free time to women and open up new opportunities to them.

There is an urgent need to expand the purview of economics not only for gender justice but mainly for moving towards a realistic economics.

Remoteness is no hindrance to academic excellence

According to the Times Higher Education ranking for the last year, the IITs at Ropar (Punjab) and Indore (Madhya Pradesh) are within the top 100 young universities of the world.

- There are few questions regarding IITs.
- How many Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) should India have, and what should these institutes try to achieve?
- Excellence in education depends on the quality of mentorship; not on the size or location of campuses.

Core functions of an engineering college: The core functions of an engineering school are to:

- guide students along as they inquire and **discover their interests in science and engineering**;
- engage students with the interactions between technology, society, economics and the environment;
- prepare students for working careers as designers and gadget-makers, but also as **entrepreneurs**;
- invent new gadgets and discover new science, and
- enmesh all of these activities with **local developmental needs**.

Challenges:

- **A lack of language and study skills:** About a quarter of the incoming undergraduates need extra training and confidence-building measures in using the English language. A key problem in most engineering colleges is that the students should not only become skilled engineers but should also train to speak and write clearly.
- **Poor student-faculty ratio:** The student strength has been increased without an accompanying, proportionate increase in faculty strength.
- **Faculty recruitment** is such a big problem; that only around a dozen IITs can be comfortably staffed with world-class faculty.
 - ✓ Not enough faculty members are hired, and that those hired are burdened with additional tasks such as running the canteen, etc.

Way forward

- **Recruitment and retention:** Because our faculty salaries are lower than the international norms, it makes sense to hire many more faculty members than we do now.
 - ✓ In a **labour-surplus country like India**, we should readily use all the skilled labour that we can muster.

- ✓ To improve, faculties should be made bigger, and **recruitment yardsticks should focus on quality and not quantity.**
- ✓ If hiring is done on the basis of the number of papers, size of grants won and the like, then those hired may be mediocre, paper-manufacturing mills.
- **Induction programme:** The solution at many IITs has been to set aside time and resources towards initiating incoming students into college level education.. This useful programme requires time and mentorship effort from faculty members.
- **A substantial final year project** can be nourishing and fulfilling for anyone completing an academic degree, because it presents an opportunity for focused work bringing together different strands of knowledge and skills on a concrete problem.

Remoteness is not a hindrance to excellence. Cornell University is located in the heart of rural New England, and has been excellent from even before the Internet age. In the coming post-COVID-19 future, remoteness that is hand-in-hand with connectedness may even attract start-ups.

Ranked 140 of 156 countries, India slips 28 spots in WEF's global gender gap report

India is now ranked 140 among 156 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021.

- The Global Gender Gap Report was first published in 2006 by the World Economic Forum.
- The 2020 report covers 153 countries.
- The Global Gender Gap Index is an index designed to measure gender equality.

Performance of India:

- India is now one of the **worst performers in South Asia**, trailing behind neighbours Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.
- **India has declined on the political empowerment index** by 13.5 percentage points.
- There is a decline in the number of women ministers, from 23.1 per cent in 2019 to 9.1 per cent in 2021.
- It has still performed relatively well compared to other countries, ranking at 51 in **women's participation in politics.**
- In the **index of education attainment**, India has been ranked at 114.
- **Economic participation:** The report notes that the economic participation gender gap actually widened in India by 3 percent this year.
 - ✓ The share of women in professional and technical roles declined further to 29.2 per cent.
 - ✓ The share of women in senior and managerial positions also is at 14.6 per cent and only 8.9 percent firms in the country have top female managers.
- **The estimated earned income of women** in India is only one-fifth of men's.
- **Worst performance:** India has fared the worst in "**Health and Survival**", which includes the sex ratio, and economic participation of women.
- India is ranking at 155 — the only country to have fared worse is China.
- The report points to **a skewed sex ratio** as a major factor.
 - ✓ A skewed sex ratio can be attributed to norms of son preference and gender-biased prenatal sex-selective practices.
 - ✓ China and India together account for about 90 to 95 per cent of the estimated 1.2 to 1.5 million missing female births annually worldwide due to gender-biased prenatal sex selective practices.

Global performance

- The report points out that many countries have fared worse in this year's rankings compared to last year's, on account of economic performance.
- On its current trajectory, **it will now take 135.6 years to close the gender gap worldwide.**
- **The gender gap in political empowerment remains the largest.**
- Women represent only 26.1 per cent of some 35,500 parliament seats and just 22.6 per cent of over 3,400 ministers worldwide.
- In 81 countries, there has never been a woman head of state.
- Bangladesh is the only country where more women have held head-of-state positions than men in the past 50 years.
- The second-largest gender gap among the four components of the index is for the **Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex.**
- The countries with the largest gender gaps in economic participation include Iran, India, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan.
- South Asia is one of the worst performing regions, followed only by the Middle East and northern Africa.
- The report estimates that it will take South Asia 195.4 years to close the gender gap, while Western Europe will take 52.1 years.

National Policy for Rare Diseases, 2021

Union Health & Family Welfare Minister approved the "National Policy for Rare Diseases 2021".

- Draft Policy for Rare Diseases was put in the public domain on which comments/views were invited from all stakeholders, general public, organization and States and Union Territories.
- All the comments received were examined in depth by an Expert Committee constituted by the Ministry.

Major Provisions of the Policy:

- **Objectives:** The policy aims to lower the cost of treatment of rare diseases and increase focus on indigenous research and local production of medicines.
 - ✓ Along with lowering the cost of treatment of rare diseases, the policy aims to increase focus on indigenous research and local production of medicines.
- **Categories of Rare diseases:** Under the policy, there are **three categories** of rare diseases —
 - ✓ requiring one-time curative treatment,
 - ✓ diseases that require long-term treatment but where the cost is low, and
 - ✓ those needing long-term treatments with high cost.
- Some of the diseases in the first category include osteopetrosis and immune deficiency disorders, among others.
- The Rare Diseases Policy aims to lower the high cost of treatment for rare diseases with increased focus on indigenous research with the help of a **National Consortium** to be set up with Department of Health Research, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare as convenor.
- **Financial support:** Those who are suffering from rare diseases (diseases listed under Group 1 in the rare disease policy) that require one-time treatment will have the **financial support of up to Rs 20 lakh under the umbrella scheme of Rashtriya Arogya Nidhi.**
 - ✓ It will cover about 40 per cent of the population who are eligible under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana.

- ✓ Beneficiaries for such financial assistance would not be limited to BPL families, but the benefit will be extended to about 40% of the population, who are eligible under Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana.
- ✓ **Crowdfunding:** Besides, the Policy also envisages a crowd funding mechanism in which corporates and individuals will be encouraged to extend financial support through a robust IT platform for treatment of rare diseases.
- **A national hospital-based registry** of rare diseases will be created to ensure adequate data and comprehensive definitions of such diseases are available for those interested in research and development.
- The Policy also focuses on **early screening and prevention** through primary and secondary health care infrastructure such as Health and Wellness Centres and District Early Intervention Centres (DEICs) and through counselling for the high-risk parents.
 - Screening will also be supported by Nidan Kendras set up by Department of Biotechnology.
- Policy also aims to **strengthen tertiary health care facilities** for prevention and treatment of rare diseases through designating 8 health facilities as Centre of Excellence and these CoEs will also be provided one-time financial support of up to Rs 5 crores for upgradation of diagnostics facilities.

Challenges

- **Early diagnosis of rare diseases** is a major challenge owing to a variety of factors that include lack of awareness among primary care physicians, lack of adequate screening and diagnostic facilities etc.
- **Research and development** for the majority of rare diseases as relatively little is known about the **pathophysiology** or the natural history of these diseases particularly in the Indian context.
- **Availability and accessibility to medicines** are also important to reduce morbidity and mortality associated with rare disease.
- **The cost of treatment of rare diseases** is prohibitively expensive. Various High Courts and the Supreme Court have also expressed concern about lack of a national policy for rare diseases.

What are rare diseases?

- **Broadly, a 'rare disease' is defined** as a health condition of low prevalence that affects a small number of people when compared with other prevalent diseases in the general population.
- As per a report, over 50 per cent of new cases are reported in children and these diseases are responsible for 35 per cent of deaths in those below the age of one, 10 per cent of deaths between the ages of one and five, and 12 per cent between five and 15.
- **India does not have a definition of rare diseases:** it is because there is a lack of epidemiological data on their incidence and prevalence.
- In India, roughly 450 rare diseases have been recorded from tertiary hospitals, of which the most common are **Haemophilia, Thalassemia, Sickle-cell anemia, auto-immune diseases, Gaucher's disease, and cystic fibrosis.**
- Out of all rare diseases in the world, less than five per cent have therapies available to treat them.

Army's evaluation criteria to grant permanent commission for women officers 'arbitrary': Supreme Court

The Supreme Court ordered the Central government to allow permanent commission (PC) to women officers in the Indian Army and Navy who were excluded from the same on the ground of fitness standards.

More on the news

- The Supreme Court was hearing a batch of petitions that was filed by 80 women officers for permanent Commission in the Indian army and Navy, over seeking a direction that contempt proceedings be initiated against those who had allegedly failed in their duty to comply with the top court's earlier judgement.
- Government officers in their petitions have alleged that the directions were not being complied with in letter and spirit.
- In February 2020 **the Supreme Court allowed women officers in the army to be eligible for command positions on par with the male officers** asserting that the government's arguments against it were discriminatory, Disturbing and were based on stereotypes.
- The apex Court said that "The question of evaluating on inter-se-merit does not arise. Officers will be considered for permanent commission subject to disciplinary and vigilance clearance."
- According to the apex court superficial face of equality is not in consonance with the principles that are enshrined in the constitution of India.
- The court also noted that the trials and Tribulations of army life become more difficult than society gives the women the responsibility of childcare as well as the domestic work.
- The court also noted that the permanent Commission would be available to all the women regardless of their years of service.

What does the Permanent Commission mean?

- The Permanent Commission refers to a career in the army until one retires. This implies that If one gets selected through PC, one has the option to serve the country up to the full age of retirement.

Women in the Army: History of the case

- The induction of women officers in the Army began in the year 1992. They were **commissioned for a period of five years** in certain chosen streams such as Army Education Corps, Corps of Signals, Intelligence Corps, and Corps of Engineers.
- Recruits under the **Women Special Entry Scheme (WSES)** had a shorter pre-commission training period than their male counterparts who were commissioned under the Short Service Commission (SSC) scheme.
- In 2006, the WSES scheme was replaced with the **SSC scheme**, which was extended to the women officers. They were commissioned for a period of 10 years, extendable up to 14 years.
- Serving WSES officers were given the option to move to the new SSC scheme, or to continue under the erstwhile WSES.
- They were to be however, restricted to roles in streams that were earlier specified — which excluded combat arms such as the infantry and the armoured corps.

What was the Supreme Court's Order?

- The Court order came on a nearly 10-year-old appeal filed by the government against the 2010 decision of the Delhi High Court that granted the Staff Service Commission women officers' permanent commission.
- The court ordered the government to implement its judgment in three months of the order.

Highlights of the Judgement

- All the serving women officers were made eligible for the Permanent Commission (PC).
- The court did away with all discrimination on the basis of years of service for grant of PC in 10 streams of combat support arms and services, bringing them on a par with male officers.
- The Court also made the women officers eligible for command posts in non combat areas since an absolute bar on women seeking criteria or command appointments does not go with the guarantee of equality under **Article 14 of the Constitution of India**.
- It was left on the army to decide on such cases on a case to case basis.

How is the Government's Stand discriminatory?

- The government's stand shows the women officers in a poor light, saying isolation and hardships would eat into their resolve and that they would have to heed to the call of pregnancy, childbirth and family.
- The government also mentioned that women ran the risk of capture by enemy and taken prisoner of war.
- The court noted that the government's notion reflects the archaic patriarchal nature of the society.
- The Court also dismissed the government's point that women are physically weaker than men as a stereotype.
- The apex court also noted that challenging the abilities of women on grounds such as gender, is an offence not only to their dignity as women but also to the dignity of the members of the Indian Army – men and women – who serve as equal citizens in a common mission.

Implications of the Judgement by the SC

- The women officers are made eligible to occupy all the command appointments, at par with male officers. This has the potential to open avenues for further promotions to higher ranks for them.
- If the women officers had served only in staff, they would not have gone beyond the rank of Colonel.
- After the implementation of the judgement, the women can rise to the ranks of Colonel and above based on their merit, like their male counterparts.
- At the rank of Colonel, an officer picks up a substantive command and would be delegated to carry out independent tasks.
- A Colonel commands a battalion, which typically consists of 850 men. A woman officer who is successful in this position could technically rise to the highest ranks of the Army, though, women officers will not be inducted into the combat arms such as the infantry, artillery or armoured corps.
- It will set a precedent for other sectors to empower women.
- The judgement has the potential to uplift the situation of women across the Army as well as the Navy.

Way Forward

- The government needs to implement the judgement as soon as possible.
- Judiciary should take strict action against those who do not comply with the order.
- The bigger shift will have to take place in the culture, norms, and values of the rank and file of the Army, which will be the responsibility of the senior military and political leadership.
- After the Supreme Court's progressive decision, they have no choice but to bite the proverbial bullet.

UNFPA's population report

The United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA) flagship State of World Population Report 2021 titled 'My Body is My Own' was launched.

Key points:

- **Bodily autonomy:** Nearly half the women from 57 developing countries do not have the right to make decisions regarding their bodies, including using contraception, seeking healthcare or even on their sexuality.
 - ✓ This is the first time a United Nations report has focused on **bodily autonomy**.
 - ✓ Women's access to bodily autonomy is measured in the report through their power to make their own decisions about their reproductive health care, contraceptive use and sexual relations and the extent to which the laws of the countries support or interfere with a woman's right to make these decisions.

Bodily autonomy

- It is defined as the power and agency to make choices about your body without fear of violence or having someone else decide for you.
- Some examples of violation of bodily autonomy include
 - ✓ child marriage, female genital mutilation, a lack of contraceptive choices leading to unplanned pregnancy,
 - ✓ unwanted sex exchanged for a home and food or
 - ✓ when people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities cannot walk down a street without fearing assault or humiliation.
 - ✓ people with disabilities stripped of their rights to self-determination,
 - ✓ to be free from violence and to enjoy a safe and satisfying sexual life.

- Only 55% of women are fully empowered to make choices over healthcare, contraception and the ability to say yes or no to sex.
- Only 75% of countries legally ensure full and equal access to contraception.
- The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this situation.

Situation in India

- In India, according to **NFHS-4 (2015-2016)**, only about **12% of currently married women (15-49 years of age)** independently make decisions about their own healthcare, while 63% decide in consultation with their spouse.
- For a quarter of women (23%), it is the spouse that mainly takes decisions about healthcare.
- **Only 8% of currently married women (15-49 years)** take decisions on the use of contraception independently, while **83%** decide jointly with their spouse.
- Information provided to women about use of contraception is also limited — only 47% women using a contraceptive were informed about the side effects of the method, and 54% women were provided information about other contraceptives.

Significance

- Bodily autonomy is essential to achieving the UNFPA's goals of ending the global unmet need for contraception, preventable maternal deaths, gender-based violence and harmful practices by 2030.

About United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

- The organization was created in 1969, the same year the United Nations General Assembly declared "parents have the exclusive right to determine freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children."
- It is the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency.
- UNFPA is a **subsidiary organ of the UN General Assembly**.
- It reports to the **UNDP/UNFPA Executive Board of 36 UN Member States** on administrative, financial and programme matters and receives overall policy guidance from the **UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)**.
- **The Executive Board** is composed of 36 members: eight from Africa, seven from Asia and the Pacific, four from Eastern Europe, five from Latin America and the Caribbean, and 12 from Western Europe and other developed countries.
- **Funding:** UNFPA is entirely supported by voluntary contributions of donor governments, intergovernmental organizations, the private sector, and foundations and individuals, **not by the United Nations regular budget**.
- **Objective:** UNFPA calls for the realization of reproductive rights for all and supports access to a wide range of sexual and reproductive health services – including voluntary family planning, maternal health care and comprehensive sexuality education.

CURRENT AFFAIRS



INTERNAL SECURITY & DEFENCE



Indian and US Special Forces Conclude Joint Training Exercise

The 11th edition of Indo-US Joint Special Forces Exercise **VAJRA PRAHAR 2021** was conducted in Bakloh, HP.

Significance:

- It is a **bilateral exercise** between the special forces of India and the US.
- The joint exercise by the Special Forces of both the countries is conducted alternatively between India and the United States to **share the best practices and experiences** in areas such as joint mission planning and operational tactics as also to improve interoperability between the Special Forces of both nations.
- **Bilateral military exercises and defence exchanges** are an important facet of deepening bilateral defence cooperation between friendly countries.

Important Indian bilateral army exercises

Exercise Name	Participant countries
Vajra Prahar	India & US
Yudh Abhyas	India & US
Sampriti	India & Bangladesh
Mitra Shakti	India & Sri Lanka
Maitree Exercise	India & Thailand
Nomadic Elephant	India & Mongolia
Garuda Shakti	India & Indonesia
Shakti Exercise	India & France
Dharma Guardian	India & Japan
Surya Kiran	India & Nepal
Hand in Hand Exercise	India & China

The case of Chinese Cyber Attack

Context- Accepting that there is a capability differential between India and China, India's Chief of Defense Staff (CDS) made a statement that China is capable of launching cyber attacks on India that can disrupt a large number of systems.

Background

- A new study found out that the power outage last year in **Mumbai**, which was said to be the worst power failure in decades, may have its links to the India and China **border tensions in Ladakh**.
- The study adds that the mega Mumbai power outage may be the result of a cyber attack from China in an attempt to give a sign to India not to press too hard on the borders.
- **According to the CDS**, India may not be fully able to catch up with China and hence trying to develop relationships with the Western nations in this regard, which will help us overcome this deficiency.
- According to the **Union Ministry of Power**, state sponsored Chinese hacker groups targeted various Indian power centers including Mumbai.
- The Ministry also said that these groups have been thwarted after government cyber agencies wondered about their activities.
- **NCIIPC Report** stated that a Chinese state-sponsored threat Actor group known as **Red Echo** is targeting Indian **Power sector's Regional Load Dispatch Centres (RLDCs)** along with **State Load Dispatch Centres (SLDCs)**.

Chinese Cyber Attacks on India

- The maximum number of cyber attacks on official Indian websites are by China followed by the US and Russia. The cyber attacks from **China make up 35% of the total number of cyber attacks on official Indian websites, followed by the US (17%), Russia (15%), Pakistan (9%), Canada (7%) and Germany (5%)**.
- Such incidents where a State is involved in cyber attacks are not new for India. These are often referred to as state sponsored cyber attacks which are a part of cyber warfare.
- In **2009**, a suspected cyber espionage network dubbed as **GhostNet** was found to be targeting the Tibetan government in exile in India, and many Indian embassies.
- By pursuing the leads from that discovery, researchers found what they dubbed the **Shadow Network**- a vast cyberespionage operation which extensively targeted Indian entities, including military establishments, news publications, and even the National Security Council Secretariat itself, with clear evidence that confidential documents had been accessed by the attackers.

Cyber Warfare

- It involves units which are organised along nation state boundaries, **in offensive and defensive operations** and uses computers to attack other computers or networks through electronic means.
- **Hackers** and other individuals who are trained in software programming and exploiting the intricacies of computer networks are primarily executed for such attacks.
- These individuals operate under the auspices and possibly the support of nation state actors.
- In a nutshell, cyber warfare simply involves those actions by a nation state or an international organisation that attack and attempt to damage and other nations' computers or information networks through means such as computer viruses or denial of service attacks.

Methods of Cyber Warfare

- **Sabotage-** Military and financial computer systems are at risk for the disruption of normal operations and equipment like **communications, power, fuel and transportation infrastructures**.
- **Espionage-** These are the illegal exploitation methods which are used to disable networks, software, computers or the Internet to steal or acquire critical or classified information from rival institutions/ nations/ individuals either for military, political or financial gains.

India's Measures to strengthen Cyber-security

- **National Security Council-** It is usually chaired by the **National Security Adviser (NSA)**, and plays a key role in shaping India's cyber policy ecosystem. It is the executive agency that is responsible for advising the Prime Minister's Office on issues of **national security and strategic interest**.
- **National Information Board-** It is the apex body that is responsible for **coordination among the different ministries on cybersecurity policymaking**.
- **National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre (NCIIPC)-** It was established under the **National Technical Research Organisation** in January 2014 and mandated to facilitate the **protection of critical information infrastructure in India**.
- **National Cyber Security Coordinator-** It advises the National Security Council Secretariat in overseeing and compliance of all the cyber security aspects including implementation of action plans in cyber security by the nodal agencies, evaluation and analysis of incidents, then forming incident response monitoring teams.
- **India's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT--IN)-** It is the **nodal entity responding to various cyber security threats like hacking and phishing to non-critical infrastructure**. It provides Incident Prevention and Response Services as well as Security Quality Management Services. It collects, analyses and disseminates information on cyber incidents, and also issues alerts on cybersecurity incidents.
- The **Ministry of Defence** has recently upgraded the Defence Information Assurance and Research Agency to establish the **Defence Cyber Agency**, a tri -service command of the Indian armed forces to coordinate and control joint cyber operations, and craft India's cyber doctrine.
- Ministry of Home Affairs oversees multiple **"coordination centres"** that focus on law enforcement efforts to address **cybercrime, espionage and terrorism**.
- **Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C)-** It is established to deal with all types of cybercrimes in a **comprehensive and coordinated manner**.
- **National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal-** It is a citizen centric initiative that enables citizens to report cybercrimes online and the complaints are assessed by the concerned law enforcement agencies and actions are taken as per law.
- **National cyber security policy, 2013-** It is aimed at building a secure and resilient cyberspace for citizens, businesses and the government and has a mission to protect cyberspace information and infrastructure, build capabilities to prevent and respond to cyber attacks and minimise damages through coordinated efforts of institutional structures, people, processes and technology.
- **Cyber Swachhta Kendra (Botnet Cleaning and malware Analysis Centre)-** It is a new desktop and mobile security solution for cyber security in India and was launched in 2017 by CERT-IN.
- The **Ministry of External Affairs** coordinates India's cyber diplomacy push — both bilaterally with other countries, and at international fora like the United Nations and persuades initiatives of cyber security of the countries.

Remaining Concerns

- Presence of **multiple agencies** with overlapping functions has resulted in lack of cooperation and effective coordination.

- This also is a major cause of **lack of institutional boundaries and accountability**.
- Reports indicate that India too engages in targeted cyber-attacks, the **rules of engagement for that too are unclear**. This is unlike India's approach to other global security regimes. For e.g. the 'No First Use' nuclear doctrine.
- The **absence of a credible cyber deterrence strategy** means that states and non-state actors alike remain incentivised to undertake low scale cyber operations for a variety of purposes — espionage, cybercrime, and even the disruption of critical information infrastructure.

Conclusion

Clearer strategy and greater transparency is the need of the hour to improve India's cybersecurity posture. To better detect and counter threats from both state actors and their proxies as well as online criminals, improved coordination is needed at different levels like between the government and the private sector, within the government itself —at the national and State levels.

CDS Rawat launches joint logistics facility in Mumbai

Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat operationalised the third joint logistics node (JLN) in Mumbai.

Key points:

- Establishment and operationalisation of JLN is a very important first step in the direction of **logistics integration of our three Services**.
- These JLN will provide **integrated logistics cover to the armed forces** for their small arms ammunition, rations, fuel, general stores, civil hired transport, aviation clothing, spares and also engineering support in an effort to synergise their operational efforts.
- The initiative would accrue advantages in terms of **saving of manpower, economise utilisation of resources, besides financial savings**.

Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)

- The Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister had approved to create the post of **Chief of Defence Staff** in the rank of a four-star General with salary and benefits equivalent to a Service Chief.
- The Centre notified the retirement age for the CDS as **65 years, which will be three years more than the retirement age of the three service chiefs**.

Role of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)

Fundamentally, the CDS will perform two roles, as the **single point military advisor to the Defence Minister** and as **head of the Department of Military Affairs (DoMA)**.

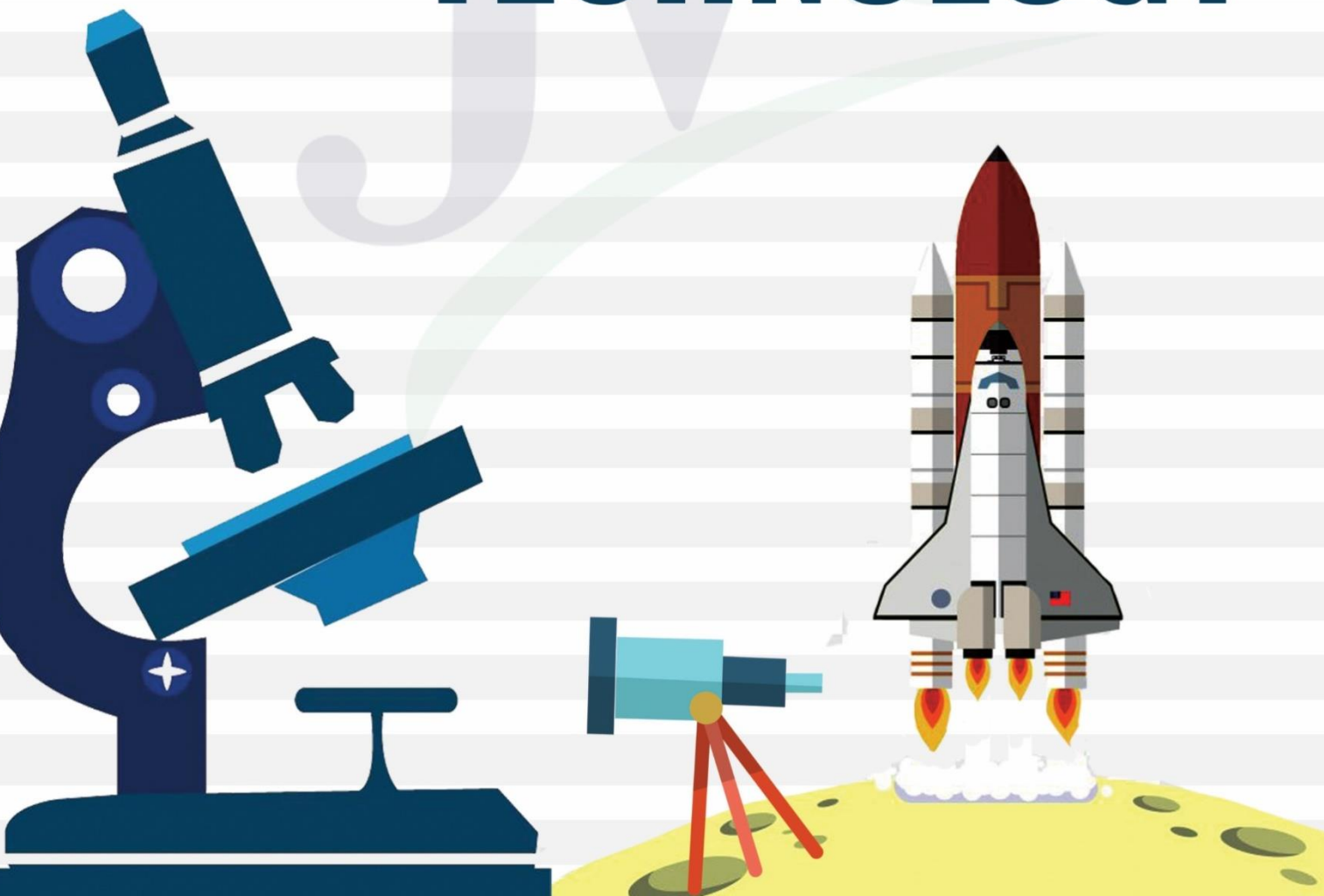
- **First role:** The CDS will act as the **principal military adviser to the defence minister** on tri-Services issues.
 - ✓ **The three Chiefs will continue to render advice** to the defence minister on matters pertaining exclusively to their service.
 - ✓ The CDS is also vested with the authority to **provide directives to the three chiefs**.
 - ✓ He has **no military command over the other services** and **can only advise the government** on matters that concern all three services.

- **The second role:** Additionally, the CDS will lead the Department of Military Affairs (DoMA) dealing with the three services.
 - ✓ CDS will enjoy the rank of Secretary within the DoD and his **powers will be confined to only the revenue budget.**
 - ✓ CDS is vested with the **authority in prioritising inter-service procurement decisions** as Permanent Chairman-Chiefs of Staff Committee.
 - ✓ The CDS as the PC-COSC would **administer all tri-Services organisations** including the Strategic Forces Command that function under the Nuclear Command Authority.

While the **CDS does not enjoy any command authority**, in its capacity as DoMA, it will wield control over issues governing promotions, travel, appointments to key posts, and overseas assignments.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY



Explained: How & why of oxygen therapy

The ongoing second surge in Covid-19 cases has seen a huge rise in the demand for supplemental oxygen.

- In India, 1.75% of the patients were in ICU beds, 0.40% were on ventilator, and 4.03% were occupying oxygen beds.
- Since the total active cases have now risen to 20,31,977, the number of patients requiring oxygen beds is significant.

Need for oxygen

- Shortness of breath occurs because of the way Covid-19 affects the patient's respiratory system.
- A small proportion of Covid-19 patients need oxygen support, when shortness of breath progresses to a more acute condition.
- Most patients with Covid-19 have a respiratory tract infection, and in the most severe cases their symptoms can include shortness of breath.
- In a small proportion of such cases, this can progress to a more severe and systemic disease characterised by Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS).

Mechanism of lungs

- The lungs enable the body to **absorb oxygen from the air and expel carbon dioxide**.
- When a person inhales, the tiny air sacs in the lungs called **alveoli** — expand to capture this oxygen, which is then transferred to blood vessels and transported through the rest of the body.
- Respiratory **epithelial cells** line the respiratory tract.
- Their primary function is to protect the airway tract from pathogens and infections, and also facilitate gas exchange.

Effect of Covid-19 on lungs:

- The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus can infect these epithelial cells.
- To fight such infection, the body's immune system releases cells that trigger inflammation.
- When this **inflammatory immune response** continues, it impedes the regular transfer of oxygen in the lungs.
- Simultaneously, fluids too build up.
- Low levels of oxygen triggered by Covid-19 are inflammatory markers, which include elevated white blood cell counts and neutrophil counts.

Symptoms of Covid-19 in second wave

- **Shortness of breath** is the most common clinical feature among symptomatic hospitalised patients at 47.5%, compared to 41.7% during the first wave.
- Simultaneously, other symptoms have dropped significantly compared to the first wave.

Conditions under which oxygen is used

- According to the clinical management protocol, a person is suffering from moderate disease when he or she is diagnosed with

- ✓ pneumonia with no signs of severe disease;
- ✓ with the presence of clinical features of **dyspnea (shortness of breath)** and/or **hypoxia** (when the body is deprived of adequate oxygen supply at the tissue level);
- ✓ fever, cough, including **SpO2 (oxygen saturation level) less than 94%** (range 90-94%) in room air.
- ✓ The “SpO2” reading on a **pulse** oximeter shows the percentage of oxygen in someone's blood.
- ✓ In **silent hypoxia**, patients have extremely low blood oxygen levels, yet do not show signs of breathlessness.
- ✓ They frequently arrive at the emergency room for other reasons, such as muscle aches, fatigue, fever and cough.
- **Target:** In moderate cases, oxygen therapy is the primary form of treatment: the target is to **achieve 92-96% SpO2**, or 88-92% in patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.
- **The devices** for administering oxygen in moderate disease are nasal prongs, masks, or masks with breathing/non-rebreathing reservoir bags, depending on requirement.
- The protocol also recommends **awake proning** (having patients lie on their stomachs) as a rescue therapy to increase oxygenation.
- The clinical management protocol recommends **oxygen therapy at 5 litres/min.**
- Severe cases are defined in three categories:
 - ✓ severe pneumonia,
 - ✓ acute respiratory distress syndrome, and
 - ✓ sepsis.

Emergency measures: When respiratory distress and/or hypoxemia of the patient cannot be alleviated after receiving standard oxygen therapy, the protocol recommends that **high-flow nasal cannula oxygen therapy or non-invasive ventilation can be considered.**

NASA Mars helicopter makes first flight on another planet

NASA's Mars Ingenuity helicopter became the first powered craft to fly on another world.

- The flight was the first of five planned for the next 30 days.
- Ingenuity arrived at Mars's Jezero Crater in February along with NASA's **Perseverance rover**, which was on hand to capture the historic flight on camera.

Significance:

- It is a technology demonstration experiment: to test whether the helicopter can fly in the sparse atmosphere on Mars.
- **The low density of the Martian atmosphere** makes it difficult to fly a helicopter or an aircraft on Mars very low.
- **Long-distance transportation on Mars** has to rely on vehicles that rely on rocket engines for powered ascent and powered descent.

Background:

- NASA's Mars 2020 Perseverance Rover landed on the **Jezero Crater** in Mars on February 18, to much celebration.
- Its earlier Mars expedition which carried the **Curiosity rover**, landed on August 5, 2012.
- It identified regions that could have hosted life.
- NASA's exploration of Mars has focused on **finding traces and trails of water that may have existed**, and relate it to finding evidence of ancient life.

Perseverance mission produced oxygen on Mars

NASA's Perseverance mission was able to produce oxygen from the thin Martian atmosphere for the first time.

- It promises hope for future crewed missions that can rely on this technology for astronauts to breathe and return to Earth.

Key points:

- The **Mars Oxygen In-Situ Resource Utilization Experiment (MOXIE)** produced 5 grams of oxygen from carbon dioxide in the Martian atmosphere. It is enough for an astronaut to breathe for 10 minutes.
 - ✓ MOXIE inhales carbon dioxide and **exhales oxygen**, like a tree on Earth.
 - ✓ It is the size of a car battery, weighing 37.7 pounds (17.1 kg) on Earth, but just 14.14 pounds (6.41 kg) on Mars.
 - ✓ Over the next two years, MOXIE is expected to extract oxygen nine more times.

How MOXIE works

- MOXIE **extracts carbon dioxide from the atmosphere**, which makes up about 96 per cent of the wispy air blanket around Mars.
- It then compresses it and filters the gas to remove contaminants.
- The gas is then heated and the process separates oxygen atoms from carbon dioxide molecules, releasing carbon monoxide as a byproduct.
- This process occurs at extremely high temperatures of approximately 800 degrees Celsius.
- The gold-coated, insulated instrument ended up producing 5.4 grams of oxygen in one hour, which is approximately the quantity of air needed to keep an astronaut breathing for ten minutes.
- MOXIE is capable of producing 10 to 12 grams of oxygen per hour, about as much as a tree.
- **Period:** It will do so over a course of one Martian year (or two earth years) in a series of ten experiments divided into phases.
- **Mars's atmosphere:** On Mars, **carbon dioxide constitutes about 96% of the gas in the planet's atmosphere**. Oxygen is only 0.13%, whereas it constitutes 21% in Earth's atmosphere.

Significance:

- MOXIE's achievement is a **critical first step at converting carbon dioxide to oxygen on Mars**.
- To launch off of Mars, human explorers need about 33 to 50 tons (30 to 45 metric tons) of fuel, about the weight of a Space Shuttle.

- A substantial amount of oxygen supply on Mars is essential for crewed missions to Mars for
 - ✓ astronauts to breathe
 - ✓ rockets to use as fuel while coming back to Earth. Rocket propellant depends on oxygen.
- It will be an enormous challenge to haul the large volumes of oxygen from Earth to Mars for the return journey.
- It would become significantly easier if the liquified oxygen can be produced on the Mars.

Perseverance Rover:

- Perseverance is the most advanced, most expensive and most sophisticated mobile laboratory sent to Mars.
- **Different from previous missions:** The **rover introduces a drill** that can collect core samples of the most promising rocks and soils and set them aside in a "cache" on the surface of Mars.
- **Duration:** It is expected to last at least the **duration of one Mars year, or about 687 earth days.**
- **Launch:** 30th July, 2020
- **Landing:** 18th February, 2021
- **Landing site:** Jezero Crater in Mars

The mission of Perseverance on Mars

- Perseverance addresses both the critical themes around Mars
 - ✓ the search for life
 - ✓ a human mission to that planet.

Objectives of the mission:

- Perseverance will take the inquiry made by Curiosity to the next level and search for signs of past life by studying the **Jezero Crater**.
 - **The crater was chosen** for study as based on an earlier aerial survey, it was found to be home to an ancient delta.
 - **Clay minerals and carbonates** were seen, making the crater a good place to search for life's existence.

Components:

- Perseverance carries the **Radar Imager for Mars' Subsurface Experiment (RIMFAX)**.
 - RIMFAX will provide high resolution mapping of the subsurface structure at the landing site.
 - The instrument will also look for subsurface water on Mars – which, if found, will greatly help the case for a human mission or the cause of a human settlement on Mars.
- The rover also carries a **helicopter named Ingenuity** that is specially designed to fly in Mars's thin atmosphere; its sole purpose would be to demonstrate flight on Mars.

Centre tells States to increase interval between Covishield doses

The Centre wrote to States/UTs to increase the interval between two doses of Covishield to 4-8 weeks.

- **Covishield** is Serum Institute of India's version of AZD1222, the vaccine developed by AstraZeneca in collaboration with the University of Oxford.
- The vaccination drive was launched on January 16 after India's drug regulator cleared AstraZeneca-Oxford University's **Covishield** - manufactured by Serum Institute of India (SII) - and domestically made Bharat Biotech's **Covaxin**.
- The Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) granted an emergency use approval (EUA) for Covishield in India in January this year.
- Doses of the vaccines were transported from Pune to multiple hubs in the country.

Rationale behind

- There is **evidence of increased protection if the second dose of Covishield is administered between 6-8 weeks after the first dose.**
- The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare took the decision on the recommendation of two expert groups – the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (NTAGI) and National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for Covid-19 (NEGVAC).
- The groups, after looking into available scientific evidence from clinical trials of the vaccine, concluded that the protection that it provides against Covid-19 is “enhanced” if the second dose is administered between 6-8 weeks.

What is the Oxford vaccine and how does it work?

- The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is a **viral vector vaccine**.
- It is a genetically modified vaccine where a part of the SARS-CoV-2 specifically the spike protein is added to a modified version of a **chimpanzee adenovirus**, known as ChAdOx1.
- Chimpanzee adenovirus is a harmless, weakened adenovirus that usually causes the common cold in chimpanzees.

COVAXIN	VS	COVISHIELD
DEVELOPED BY BHARAT BIOTECH ICMR		DEVELOPED BY SERUM INSTITUTE OF INDIA
VACCINE TYPE INACTIVATED		VACCINE TYPE NON REPLICATING VIRAL VECTOR
EFFICACY N/A		EFFICACY DCGI: 70.42% overall
STORAGE TEMPERATURE 2-8 DEGREES CELSIUS		STORAGE TEMPERATURE 2-8 DEGREES CELSIUS
DOSES TWO DOSES (0,14 DAYS)		DOSES TWO DOSES (GAP OF 2.5 TO 3 MONTHS)
INDIA AVAILABILITY FIRST HALF 2021		INDIA AVAILABILITY ADAR: EXPECT FIRST BATCH IN 7-10 DAYS
PRICE NOT DECIDED		PRICE ₹200/DOSE TO GOVT ₹1000/DOSE FOR PRIVATE MARKET

Indian 'double mutant' strain named B.1.617

The 'double mutant' virus that scientists responsible for the spread of the pandemic in India, has a formal scientific classification: B.1.617.

- It has one **key mutation in the spike protein** similar to one found in the Brazilian and South African variants, and **another already found in the B.1.427 and B.1.429 California variants**.

Key points:

- **Indian variant:** The variant is common in India and has a couple of defining mutations, E484Q and L425R.
 - ✓ Nearly 70% of the genome sequences that have the mutations characterising B.1.617 and submitted to the global database **GISAID (Global Initiative on Sharing Avian Influenza Data)** are from India.
 - ✓ It is worrying because the mutations **E484Q and L452R** are linked to increased infectivity.
 - ✓ It could even make the coronavirus resistant to T cells, that is the class of cells necessary to target and destroy virus-infected cells.
- **'Variants of Concern (VOC)'**: Certain variants of the coronavirus B.1.1.7 and B.1.351 have been termed the 'United Kingdom' and 'South Africa' variant respectively because they have mutations associated with large spikes in these countries.
 - ✓ They reduce the efficacy of vaccines and are termed 'Variants of Concern (VOC)'.
 - ✓ So far, only three global VOCs have been identified: **the U.K. variant, the South African and the Brazilian (P.1) lineage**.
 - ✓ All three concerning mutations are on the spike protein, the operative part of the coronavirus that binds to receptor cells of the body.
 - ✓ It enables them to become more infectious as well as evade antibodies.
- International studies have shown reduced efficacy of vaccines to certain variants.
- However, the vaccines continue to be significantly protective in spite of this.

Vaccine makers should now be accounting for the variations in the spike protein in designing future vaccines.

Mutation of Coronavirus

- Every major change in a virus is called a mutation.
- These mutations have taken place in **the spike protein of the SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes Covid-19**.
- The coronavirus uses its spike proteins to latch on to human cells and force its way inside to reproduce rapidly.
- As a virus replicates, its genes undergo random "copying errors" (i.e. genetic mutations).

Mutation and immune system

- Over time, these genetic copying errors can, among other changes to the virus, lead to alterations in the virus' surface proteins or antigens.
- In influenza viruses, **genetic mutations accumulate and cause its antigens to "drift"**— meaning the surface of the mutated virus looks different than the original virus.
- A person then becomes **vulnerable to the newer, mutated flu viruses**.

- **Antigenic drift** is one of the main reasons why the flu vaccine must be reviewed and updated each year, to keep up with the influenza virus as it changes.

Viruses

- Viruses are the smallest of all the microbes.
- They are unique because they are only alive and able to multiply inside the cells of other living things. The cell they multiply in is called the host cell.
- A virus is made up of a **core of genetic material, either DNA or RNA**, surrounded by a protective coat called a capsid which is made up of protein.
- Sometimes the capsid is surrounded by an additional spikey coat called the envelope.
- Viruses are capable of latching onto host cells and getting inside them.

Genetic Mutation

- Every living organism is run by a predefined set of genes that **‘instruct’ cells how to build proteins.**
- The genetic material of the coronavirus is **ribonucleic acid (RNA) strands.**
- Each virus has about 26,000 to 32,000 bases or RNA “letters” in its length.
- These letters — **A, C, U and G** — **stand for adenine, cytosine, uracil and guanine**, nitrogen-containing biological molecules that are the fundamental units of the genetic code.
- How A, C, U and G are arranged in the genetic code determines what proteins are expressed by the organism.
- When a virus multiplies inside the cells of a living organism, it creates copies of the RNA.
- However, the process it uses to make these copies is not perfect, and often introduces **tiny errors in the sequence of bases.**
- These errors are called genetic mutations.
- Mutations that do not help the survival of the virus eventually get eliminated, while others keep getting copied in the next generation of the virus.

Genetic sequencing

- **Unravelling the genetic code, letter-by-letter, is known as genetic sequencing.**
- Genetic sequencing also reveals how the virus originated, and to some extent, help predict how it may change in the future.
- Genetic sequencing is also a valuable tool for **vaccine development.**

Centre bans export of Remdesivir

The Centre has prohibited the exports of injection Remdesivir and Remdesivir Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API).

Rationale behind:

- There has been a sudden spike in demand for injection Remdesivir used in treatment of COVID patients.

Remdesivir

- The broad-spectrum antiviral is a nucleotide analog prodrug.
- Remdesivir is an intravenous nucleotide prodrug of an adenosine analog.
- Remdesivir binds to the viral RNA-dependent RNA polymerase, inhibiting viral replication through premature termination of RNA transcription.
- **Produced by:** Seven Indian companies are producing injection Remdesivir under voluntary licensing agreement with M/s. Gilead Sciences, USA.
- As per the National Clinical Management Protocol for COVID-19 of the Central Government Remdesivir is **listed as an Investigational Therapy** (i.e. where informed and shared decision making is essential).

Guidelines:

- To ensure easy access to the injection all domestic manufactures of Remdesivir have been advised to display on their website, details of their stockists/distributors to facilitate access to the drug.
- Drugs inspectors and other officers have been directed to verify stocks and check their malpractices and also take other effective actions to curb hoarding and black marketing.
- The State Health Secretaries will review this with the Drug Inspectors of the respective States/UTs

How Sputnik V works

Sputnik V, the vaccine against Covid-19 developed by Russia, **has been cleared for emergency use** by the Drugs Controller General of India, the country's drug regulator.

- It is now the third coronavirus vaccine to get emergency use approval, after **Covishield** (Serum Institute of India) and **Covaxin** (Bharat Biotech).

Background:

- Dr Reddy's Laboratories, based in Hyderabad, had sought the government's approval for the vaccine to be used in India.
- DCGI had earlier sought additional data from the drugmaker.
- It is expected to take India's capacity to make this vaccine to over 600 million doses a year.

The Sputnik V vaccine

- **Developed by:** The Sputnik V vaccine has been developed by Gamaleya National Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology in Moscow.
- **Vectors used:** Sputnik uses a different vector for each of the two shots in a course of vaccination.
 - ✓ This provides immunity with a longer duration than vaccines using the same delivery mechanism for both shots, according to the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF).
 - ✓ It uses two different viruses that cause the **common cold (adenovirus)** in humans.
 - ✓ The adenoviruses are weakened so they cannot replicate in humans and cannot cause disease.
 - ✓ Using a different adenovirus vector may help create a more powerful immune response (compared with using the same vector twice), as it minimises the risk of the immune system developing resistance to the initial vector.
 - ✓ The two shots are given 21 days apart.
- **Storage:** Sputnik V is to be stored at -18°C in its liquid form. However, in its freeze-dried form, it can be stored at 2-8°C, in a conventional refrigerator without any need to invest in additional cold-chain infrastructure.
- **Efficacy:** The results published in The Lancet, have found it has an efficacy of 91.6%.

- ✓ In India, Dr Reddy's conducted a bridging study after which it applied for emergency use approval.
- **Controversy:** The development of the Sputnik V vaccine has been criticised for unseemly haste, corner cutting, and an absence of transparency.

Challenges:

- **Storage:** A challenge with the vaccine is its storage and liquid form of the vaccine requires it to be stored at -18°C or colder storage facilities.
 - ✓ The freeze-dried version of the vaccine can be stored in $2-8^{\circ}\text{C}$.
- **Rising infections:** Maharashtra, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Kerala and Punjab cumulatively account for three-fourth of the total active cases in the country with Maharashtra alone accounting for nearly half, according to morning figures from the Health Ministry on Sunday.

World Hemophilia Day 2021

Every year, April 17 is observed as World Hemophilia Day.

- World Hemophilia Day is about bringing the global bleeding disorders community together.
- This year's theme is 'Adapting to Change'.

Hemophilia

- It is a rare disorder of the blood, in which it doesn't clot normally because it lacks sufficient blood-clotting proteins.
- **Hemophilia** is caused by a **mutation or change**, in one of the genes, that provides instructions for making the clotting factor proteins needed to form a blood clot.
- This change or mutation can prevent the clotting protein from working properly or to be missing altogether.
- These genes are **located on the X chromosome**.
- Hemophilia is caused by **deficiency of factor VIII called Hemophilia A or factor IX called Hemophilia B**.

Signs and symptoms of spontaneous bleeding include:

- Unexplained and excessive bleeding from cuts or injuries, or after surgery or dental work
- Many large or deep bruises
- Unusual bleeding after vaccinations
- Pain, swelling or tightness in your joints

Better equipped blood banks with more robust testing for these viruses, making safer components have helped patients.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

HISTORY CULTURE & HERITAGE



Lachit Borphukan

Prime Minister called 17th century Ahom general Lachit Borphukan a symbol of India's "atmanirbhar" military might.

- The Prime Minister also said Borphukan was the inspiration behind strengthening India's naval force and revitalising inland water transport and creating infrastructure associated with it.

Lachit Borphukan

- In 1671, Borphukan led the Ahoms in the **Battle of Saraighat and defeated the Mughals**
- The Battle of Saraighat for which Borphukan is popularly attributed to was fought on the **banks of Brahmaputra**.
- Lachit Borphukan gold medal that the best cadet from the National Defence Academy is awarded.
- The medal was instituted in 1999 following an announcement by General V.P. Malik saying the medal would inspire defence personnel to emulate Borphukan's heroism and sacrifices.

The Ahom kingdom (1228–1826)

- It was a late medieval kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam. It is well known for maintaining its sovereignty for nearly 600 years and successfully resisting Mughal expansion in Northeast India.
- It was **established by Sukaphaa**, a Tai prince from Mong Mao,
- The kingdom became weaker with the rise of the **Moamoria rebellion**, and subsequently fell to repeated Burmese invasions of Assam.
- With the defeat of the Burmese after the **First Anglo-Burmese War and the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826**, control of the kingdom passed into East India Company hands.

Babu Jagjivan Ram Jayanti

Recently the birth anniversary of Babu Jagjivan Ram was celebrated.

- Jagjivan Ram, **popularly known as Babuji**, was a national leader, a freedom fighter, a crusader of social justice, a champion of depressed classes and an outstanding Parliamentarian.

His life

- Jagjivan Ram was born on 5th **April 1908** in **Chandwa in Bihar** to a Dalit family.
- He was considered '**untouchable**' and had to drink water from a different pot. Jagjivan Ram protested against this by breaking the pot. The principal then had to remove the separate pot from the school.
- Babu Jagjivan Ram contributed greatly towards our country, as a freedom fighter, as a member of the Constituent Assembly and the first Cabinet and as a Deputy PM.
- Babu Jagjivan Ram was also the **deputy prime minister of the country between 1977 and 1979**.
- He worked to attain equality for untouchables, **contributed to Green Revolution and organized rural labour movement in Bihar**.

Contributions in freedom struggle

- In 1931, he became a member of the **Indian National Congress** (Congress Party).
- He was instrumental in the foundation of the **All India Depressed Classes League**, an organisation dedicated to attaining equality for untouchables, in 1934-35.
 - ✓ He was a champion of **social equality and equal rights for the Depressed Classes**.
- He was extremely proficient in Sanskrit and was **invited to join Banaras Hindu University by the founder Madan Mohan Malviya**.
- In 1935, Babuji also appeared before the **Hammond Commission** at Ranchi and demanded, for the first time, voting rights for the Dalits.

Post Independence Contributions:

- When Jawaharlal Nehru formed the provisional government, **Jagjivan Ram became its youngest minister**.
- After independence he held the **labour portfolio until 1952**. Thereafter he served in Nehru's cabinet in the posts of **minister for communications (1952–56)**, **transport and railways (1956–62)**, and **transport and communications (1962–63)**.
- He left Congress in 1977 and joined the Janata Party alliance, along with his Congress for Democracy (new party). He later served as the **Deputy Prime Minister of India (1977–79)**.
- Jagjivan Ram was a **member of the Parliament uninterrupted from 1936 to 1986 (40 years) and this is a world record**.
- He also holds another **record for being the longest-serving cabinet minister in India (30 years)**.

Death

- He died on **6th July 1986 at New Delhi**.
- His memorial at his cremation place is named **Samta Sthal (Place of Equality)**.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was born on April 11, 1827, and his birth anniversary is celebrated as Jyotiba Phule Jayanti every year.

About

- Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was born in Satara district of Maharashtra in 1827.
- Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was an Indian writer, social activist, thinker and anti-caste social reformer from Maharashtra.
- Phule is regarded as an **important figure in the social reform movement in Maharashtra**.
- He is known to work towards the eradication of untouchability and the caste system and for his efforts in educating women.
- Phule's social activism included many fields including eradication of untouchability and the caste system, education of women and the Dalits, and welfare of downtrodden women.
- He and his wife, Savitribai Phule, were pioneers of **women's education in India**.
- He, along with his followers, **formed the Satyashodhak Samaj** (Society of Truth Seekers) to attain equal rights for people from exploited castes.
 - ✓ People from all religions and castes could become a part of this association which worked for the upliftment of the oppressed classes.

- He was bestowed with the **honorific Mahatma title** by Maharashtrian social activist Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandeekar in 1888.
- Jyotirao vehemently condemned the Vedas, the ancient holy scriptures of the Hindus.
- Jyotirao Phule was the **first person to coin the term 'Dalits'** to apply to all people considered lower caste and untouchables
- **Publications:** Tritiya Ratna (1855); Powada: Chatrapati Shivajiraje Bhosle Yancha (1869); Shetkarayacha Aasud (1881)

PM pays tribute to martyrs of Jallianwala Bagh massacre

The Prime Minister has paid tribute to the martyrs of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

Events prior to Jallianwala bagh massacre:

- **The INC supported British during the 1st World War :** Both Extremists and the moderate faction of the Indian National Congress supported the British efforts during World War 1 in hope that, British would grant self-government to India after the war.
- The **Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms 1919** proved to be a mere eyewash in the name of self-government. As per congress the reforms are “**disappointing**” and “**unsatisfactory**”.
- The government armed itself with extraordinary powers to suppress any voice against the reforms and passed the **Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act of 1919, popularly known as the Rowlatt Act.**
- **Rowlatt act:** The Rowlatt Act was passed by the British government to increase their grip on power over the common folk. This law was passed in March 1919 by the Imperial Legislative Council which gave them the **power to arrest any person without any trial.** It also authorised the **government to detain such people arrested for up to 2 years without trial.**
 - ✓ The act was passed despite unanimous opposition from the Indian members of the council, all of whom resigned in protest. These included Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Madan Mohan Malviya and Mazhar Ul Haq.
 - ✓ This act was passed on the recommendations of the Sedition Committee chaired by **Sir Sidney Rowlatt.**
- On April 9, 1919, two nationalist leaders, **Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal**, were arrested by the British officials without any provocation except that they had addressed protest meetings, and taken to some unknown destination.

The Jallianwala bagh massacre:

- On 13th April, Baisakhi day, a **large crowd of people** mostly from neighboring villages, unaware of the prohibitory orders in the Amritsar gathered in the Jallianwala Bagh.
- Dyer marched his fifty riflemen to a raised bank and ordered them to kneel and fire.
- **General Dyer blocked the only exit point** and opened fire on the unarmed crowd killing more than 1000 unarmed men, women, and children.

Aftermath :

- This event caused many **moderate Indians to abandon their loyalty** to the British and become nationalists distrustful of the British.

- The Government of India announced the **formation of a committee of inquiry** into the events in Punjab. Referred to as the Disorders Inquiry Committee, it was later more widely known as the **Hunter Commission**.
- **The report concluded that:**
 - ✓ **Lack of notice to disperse** from the Bagh, in the beginning, was an error.
 - ✓ The length of firing showed a grave error.
 - ✓ Dyer's motive of producing a sufficient moral effect was to be condemned.
 - ✓ Dyer had overstepped the bounds of his authority.
 - ✓ There had been no conspiracy to overthrow British rule in the Punjab.
- The Hunter Commission **did not impose any penal or disciplinary action** because Dyer's actions were condoned by various superiors.
- On 13 March 1940, at Caxton Hall in London, **Udham Singh, an Indian independence activist** from Sunam who had witnessed the events in Amritsar and had himself been wounded, shot and **killed former lieutenant-governor of Punjab Michael O'Dwyer**.

PM greets people of Assam on Bohag Bihu

The Prime Minister greeted the people of Assam on the occasion of Bohag Bihu or Rongali Bihu.

- India is celebrating Nav Varsh or the Hindu New Year amid the Covid pandemic for the second year in a row.

About Bihu

- It is the main festival of Assam which is celebrated three times a year.
- **Kongali or Kati Bihu** observed in October and Bhogali or Magh Bihu observed in January.
- **Rongali or Bohag Bihu** is observed in April. **Rongali or Bohag Bihu** is the Assamese new year and spring festival.
- The Rongali Bihu coincides with Punjabi New Year Baisakhi.
- It is a harvest or sowing festival.
- **On Rongali Bihu**, Assamese visit their friends and families and celebrate it with feasts, music and dancing. They also hang brass, copper or silver pots on poles in front of their house.
- **Festive food - pitha (rice cake) and larus (traditional food made of rice, coconut)** are prepared. **Traditional drinks like Chuje, Nam-Lao by Tai-Ahom, Aapong by Mising tribe and Jolpan** are also prepared and shared among family and friends.

Bharat Ratna Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar

The Prime Minister has paid tribute to Bharat Ratna Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar on his Jayanti.

- Fondly called Babasaheb, BR Ambedkar stood firmly for the rights of Dalits and untouchables.

About:

- Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb Ambedkar, was a social reformer, the principal author of the Indian Constitution, an economist and a jurist.
- Born into a Mahar family on April 14, 1891, in Mhow town of Madhya Pradesh, he later inspired the Dalit movement and campaigned against social discrimination.
- He also served as the **first law minister of India (1947–51)**.
- **Dalit movement:**
 - ✓ In 1923, he set up the 'Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha (Outcastes Welfare Association)', which was devoted to spreading education and culture amongst the downtrodden.
- **Freedom struggle:**
 - ✓ **Poona pact:** The Poona Pact was an agreement between Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar on behalf of depressed classes and upper caste Hindu leaders on the reservation of electoral seats.
 - It was made on 24 September 1932 at Yerwada Central Jail in Poona, India.
 - It was signed by Ambedkar on behalf of the depressed classes.
 - ✓ Dr. Ambedkar **attended all the three Round Table Conferences (1930-32)** in London and each time, forcefully projected his views in the interest of the 'untouchable'.
 - ✓ In 1936, Babasaheb Ambedkar founded the **Independent Labour Party**.
 - ✓ **Book:** In 1936, Ambedkar wrote his magnum opus '**Annihilation of Caste**', a fiery critique of the caste system.
 - His other works are Janta (weekly) 1930; Mook Nayak (weekly) 1920; The Untouchables 1948; Buddha Or Karl Marx 1956, etc.
- **Buddhism:** Before his death in 1956, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, together with about 200,000 fellow Dalits, at a ceremony in Nagpur.
 - ✓ He was the force behind the Dalit Buddhist Movement in India. Babasaheb Ambedkar worked tirelessly towards a society where everyone is treated as equals.
- In 1990, Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, was bestowed with **Bharat Ratna**.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

PIB CORNER



MANAS mobile app

Principal Scientific Advisor launched a mobile app to promote mental wellbeing across age groups.

About

- The app, MANAS stands for Mental Health and Normalcy Augmentation System.
- The initial version of MANAS focuses on promoting positive mental health in the **age group of 15-35**.

Benefits:

- It is a comprehensive, scalable, and **national digital wellbeing platform**.
- The app has been developed to **augment the mental wellbeing of Indian citizens**.
- It **integrates the health and wellness efforts** of various government ministries, scientifically validated indigenous tools with gamified interfaces developed and researched by various national bodies and research institutions.

Created by:

- MANAS was initiated by the Office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India.
- It was jointly executed by NIMHANS Bengaluru, AFMC (Armed Forces Medical College), Pune and C-DAC (Centre for Development of Advanced Computing) Bengaluru.

The app must be integrated with public health schemes like National Health Mission, Poshan Abhiyan, e-Sanjeevani and others so that it is used widely. Besides, the application must be made multilingual.

RBI Sets Up RRA

The Reserve Bank set up the second Regulatory Review Authority (RRA 2.0) for streamlining regulations and reducing compliance burden of regulated entities.

- Reserve Bank of India Deputy Governor **M Rajeshwar Rao** has been appointed as the Regulations Review Authority.

Background:

- The RBI had set up a Regulations Review Authority (RRA) initially for a period of one year from April 1, 1999, for reviewing regulations, circulars, reporting systems.
- The recommendations of the RRA enabled
 - ✓ streamlining and increasing the effectiveness of several procedures,
 - ✓ simplifying regulatory prescriptions,
 - ✓ issuance of master circular and
 - ✓ reduced reporting burden on regulated entities.

Key points:

- **Duration:** The RRA would be set up for a **period of one year** from May 1, 2021.
- **Objectives:**
 - ✓ Streamlining regulatory instructions
 - ✓ To reduce the compliance burden on regulated entities by streamlining the reporting mechanism;
 - ✓ Revoking obsolete instructions if necessary and
 - ✓ Obviating paper-based submission of returns wherever possible

“World Tuberculosis Day” celebrations

World Tuberculosis Day, observed on 24 March each year, is designed to build public awareness about the global epidemic of tuberculosis and efforts to eliminate the disease. India has 30% of the world's TB cases.

Initiatives in India:

1. There is a **free treatment** of TB in India.
2. India aims to **eliminate TB by 2025**, while the UN aims to eliminate TB by 2030.
3. Mass BCG vaccination to prevent TB.
4. **Revised National TB Control Programme (RNTCP)** was launched in 1993, offering free diagnosis and treatment for patients, rescuing them from otherwise sure death.
5. A Rs 12,000 cr allocation of fund over the next 3 years to fight TB.
6. A public campaign: **TB Harega Desh Jeetega**.
7. TB has been made an essential part of Comprehensive Primary Health Care and is now **integrated with Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs)**.

Initiatives of WHO:

- **Find. Treat. All. #EndTB:** A joint initiative of the World Health Organization (WHO) with the Global Fund and Stop TB Partnership, with the aim of **accelerating the TB response and ensuring access to care**, in line with WHO's overall drive towards Universal Health Coverage.
- **A global TB report:** Published by the WHO every year since 1997.

COVID-19 and TB

Experts have warned that there is a need for new tools to control the increasing pace of spread of tuberculosis (TB) and also improve the cure rate of the disease.

- Those with **lower immunity are prone to develop tuberculosis** and TB patients with low immunity may develop COVID-19.
- There is a need for new interventions like vaccines and new drugs that would help reduce the burden of TB.
- Nearly **55% of the TB cases emerge due to malnutrition**, which also hampers response to drugs.

- The **use of masks** during the pandemic has reduced cases of TB and chronic respiratory diseases. It is a useful tool to prevent spread of TB.
- There is a need to follow a **balanced nutritious diet post treatment**.

About BCG vaccine

According to the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, BCG (or bacilli Calmette-Guerin) is **given between six months after the birth of a child** to prevent tuberculosis meningitis and military disease. BCG is used in many countries with a high prevalence of TB.

BCG vaccine in India:

- It was first used in the world in 1920 and first introduced in India as a pilot project in the year **1948**.
- In 1949, it was started in schools across the country. In 1962, the National TB Program started in India and children were vaccinated soon after birth across the country.
- According to this, it can be assumed that a large population in India is BCG vaccinated.

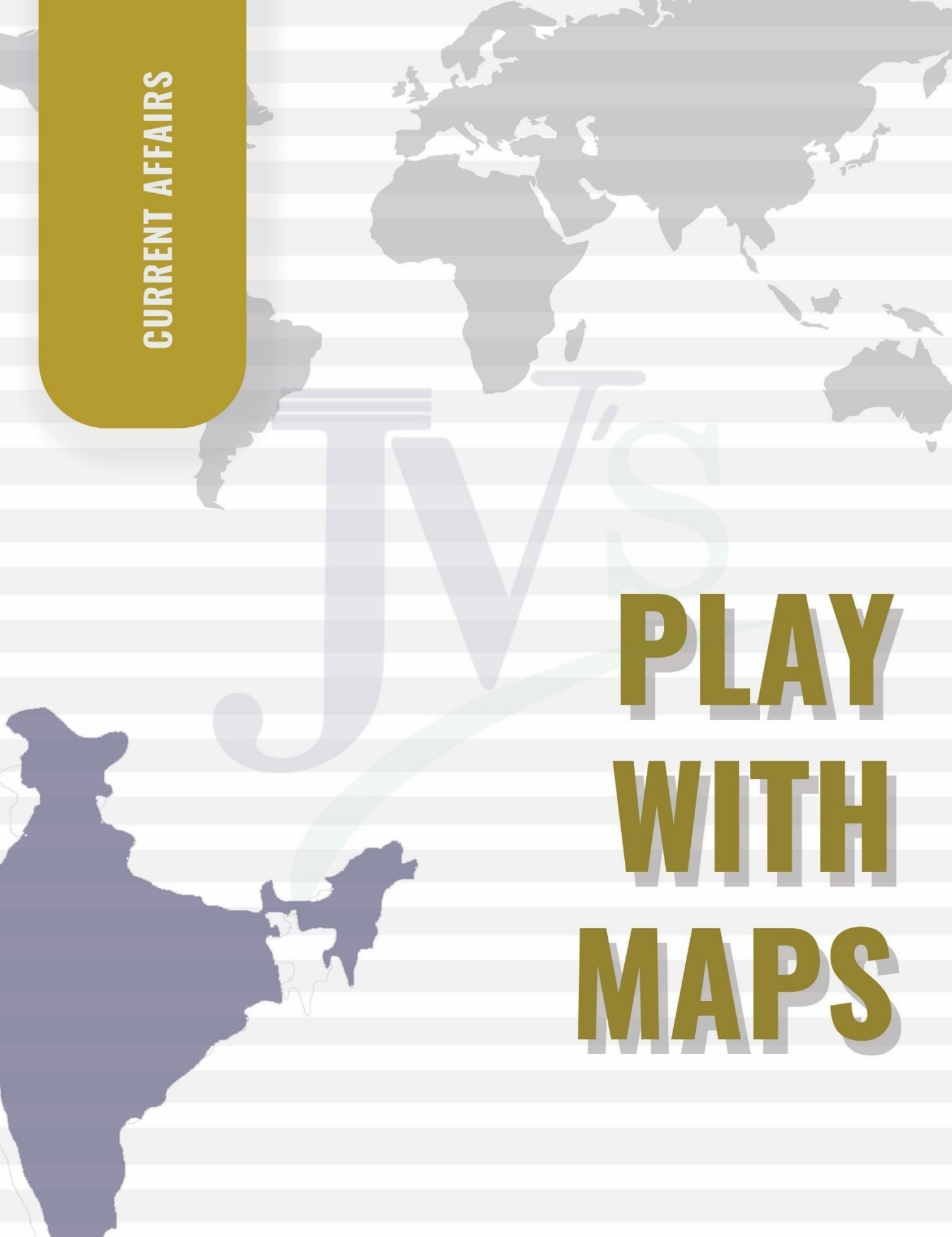
BCG vaccination consist of:

- The strains of **bacterium** that cause lung tuberculosis in humans. The strain is named **Mycobacterium Bovis**.
- During vaccine making, the strength of active bacteria is reduced so that it does not cause disease in healthy people.
- It is called **an active ingredient** in the language of medicine. In addition to this, the vaccine contains sodium, potassium and magnesium salts, glycerol and citric acid.

About Tuberculosis(TB)

- TB remains the **world's deadliest** infectious killer. Each day, over 4000 people lose their lives to TB and close to 30,000 people fall ill with this preventable and curable disease.
- Caused by the **bacillus Mycobacterium tuberculosis**, TB is **an infectious disease**. In most cases, TB affects the lungs (pulmonary TB) but can also affect other sites(non-pulmonary TB).
- It is a contagion disease, which spreads when the people who are sick with pulmonary TB expel bacteria into the air, for example by coughing.
- **Rapid molecular test, Sputum smear microscopy, Culture-based methods** are some of the diagnostic tests for TB.
- Without treatment, the mortality rate from TB is high.

CURRENT AFFAIRS



PLAY WITH MAPS

Q1. The Arctic Ocean has recently been in the news. The continental shelf of which of the following countries **does not** extend to the Arctic Ocean?

- A. Canada
- B. The United States of America(USA)
- C. Denmark
- D. All above extends to the Arctic Sea.

Answer DExplanation:

Canada, the USA, Denmark all have continental shelf extended to the Arctic Ocean. Countries bordering the Arctic Ocean are: **Russia, Norway, Iceland, Greenland, Canada** and the **United States**. Thus, D is the correct answer



Image source: Britannica.com

Q2. Consider the following statements with reference to Africa continent:

1. Africa's population is youngest among all continents
2. Egypt is the largest country of Africa by area

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. 1 only
- B. 2 only
- C. Both 1 and 2
- D. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer A

Explanation:

Only the first statement is correct. The second statement is incorrect as Algeria and NOT Egypt, is the largest country of Africa. Africa's population is the youngest among all other continents. Thus, A is the correct answer.

Q3. Consider the following pairs of places and rivers associated with them:

- | | |
|------------|-----------|
| 1. Bonn | A. Avon |
| 2. Bristol | B. Rhine |
| 3. Baghdad | C. Tigris |

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- | | | | |
|-----|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | |
| (A) | A | C | B |
| (B) | B | C | A |
| (C) | B | A | C |
| (D) | A | B | C |

Answer C

Explanation:

Bonn is located on the bank of Rhine while Bristol is located on the bank of Avon. Baghdad is located on the bank of Tigris. C is the correct answer.

Q4. Consider the following statements with reference to islands:

1. Majuli (Assam) is the largest river island in the world.
2. World's most populated island is 'Java'.
3. Greenland is the biggest island of the world.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- A. 1 and 3 only
- B. 1 and 2 only
- C. 2 and 3 only
- D. 1, 2 and 3

Answer D

Explanation:

All are correct statements. 'Majuli (Assam)' is the largest river island in the world while the Java is the most populated island in the world. The third statement is also correct. Greenland is the biggest island of the world. Thus, D is the correct answer.

Q5. Amazon rainforest is not extended to which of the following country(ies)?

1. Bolivia
2. Guyana
3. French Guiana
4. Venezuela
5. Colombia

Select the correct answer using the given below:

- A. 1, 2 and 3 only
- B. 1,2 and 4 only
- C. 2,3 and 4 only
- D. Extended to all of the above

Answer D

Explanation:

The majority of the Amazon forest is contained within Brazil, with 60% of the rainforest, followed by Peru with 13%, Colombia with 10%, and with minor amounts in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana. Thus, D is the correct answer.

Q.6) Consider the following pairs:

Sea	Bordering country
1. Black Sea	Bulgaria
2. Azov Sea	Ukraine
3. Sea of Okhotsk	Japan
4. Caspian Sea	Iraq
5. Beaufort Sea	Argentina

Which of the pairs given above are **not** correctly matched?

- a) 1, 4 and 5 only
- b) 2, 3 and 4 only
- c) 4 and 5 only
- d) 1, 2, 3 and 4 only

Ans) c

Exp)

Option 1 is correct. Six countries border the Black Sea, including Ukraine to the north, Russia and Georgia to the east, Turkey to the south, and **Bulgaria** and Romania to the west.

Option 2 is correct. Azov sea bordering countries- **Ukraine** and Russia

Option 3 is correct. Sea of Okhotsk bordering countries- Russia and **Japan**

Option 4 is incorrect. Caspian sea bordering countries- **Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan**

Option 5 is incorrect. Beaufort Sea bordering countries- Beaufort Sea, outlying sea of the Arctic Ocean situated north of Canada and Alaska (USA)



Q.7) Consider the following pairs:

Dam	River
1. Hirakud	Mahanadi
2. Mettur	Godavari
3. Nagarjuna Sagar	Cauvery

Which of the pairs given above is/are correctly matched?

a) 1 and 3 only

- b) 1 only
- c) 1 and 2 only
- d) 2 and 3 only

Ans) b

Exp)

Pair 1 is correct. Hirakud Dam is built across the **Mahanadi River**, about 15 kilometres (9 mi) from Sambalpur in the state of Odisha in India. Behind the dam extends a lake, Hirakud Reservoir, 55 km (34 mi) long. It is one of the first major multipurpose river valley projects started after India's independence

Pair 3 is incorrect. Nagarjuna Sagar Dam is a masonry dam across the **Krishna** river at Nagarjuna Sagar which straddles the border between Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh and Nalgonda district, Telangana. It was constructed between 1955 and 1967. Nagarjuna Sagar was the earliest in a series of large infrastructure projects termed as "modern temples" initiated for achieving the Green Revolution in India. It is also one of the earliest multi-purpose irrigation and hydro-electric projects in India.

Pair 2 is incorrect. The **Mettur** Dam is one of the largest dams in India and the largest in Tamil Nadu, located across the river **Cauvery** where it enters the plains. Built in 1934, it took 9 years to complete. The dam receives inflows from its own catchment area, Kabini Dam and Krishna Raja Sagara Dams located in Karnataka. It provides irrigation and drinking water facilities for more than 12 districts of Tamil Nadu and hence is revered as the life and livelihood-giving asset of Tamil Nadu.

Q.8) Consider the following Pairs regarding passes in India:

(Pass)	(State)
1. Rohtang Pass	Uttarakhand
2. Sela Pass	Arunachal Pradesh
3. Mana Pass	Himachal Pradesh

Which of the pairs given above is/are correctly matched?

- a) 1 only
- b) 2 only
- c) 2 and 3 only
- d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans) b

Exp) Rohtang Pass

It is a high mountain pass on the eastern end of the Pir Panjal Range of the Himalayas around 51 km from Manali. It connects the Kullu Valley with the Lahaul and Spiti Valleys of **Himachal Pradesh**, India. **(Pair 1 is incorrect)**

Sela Pass

The Sela Pass is a high-altitude mountain pass located on the border between the Tawang and West Kameng Districts of **Arunachal Pradesh** state in India. It has an elevation of 4170 m and connects the Indian Buddhist town of Tawang to Dirang and Guwahati. **(Pair 2 is correct)**

Mana Pass

Mana Pass is located within the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, 47 km north of the town of Mana, India and 52 km north of the Hindu pilgrimage town of Badrinath in **Uttarakhand**. It is the source of the Saraswati River, the longest stem of one of the longest Ganges tributaries, the Alaknanda River. **(Pair 3 is incorrect)**

Q.9) “North-South corridor aims at connecting Srinagar with Kanyakumari and the East-West Corridor has been planned to connect Silchar in Assam with the port town of Porbandar in Gujarat “

The above two corridors intersect at which of the following cities?

- a) Nagpur
- b) Bhopal
- c) Jhansi
- d) Gwalior

Ans) c

Exp) North-South corridor aims at connecting Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir with Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu (including Kochchi-Salem Spur) with 4,076-km long road. The East-West Corridor has been planned to connect Silchar in Assam with the port town of Porbandar in Gujarat with 3,640-km of road length.

Both the **North-South and the East-West corridors** pass through **Jhansi**, making it a unique city.

Q.10) In which of the following regions of the world, Mediterranean agriculture is/are practiced?

1. Countries on the European side of the Mediterranean Sea
2. Southern California
3. South Eastern China

Select the correct answer using the code given below.

- a) 1 only
- b) 1 and 2 only
- c) 2 and 3 only

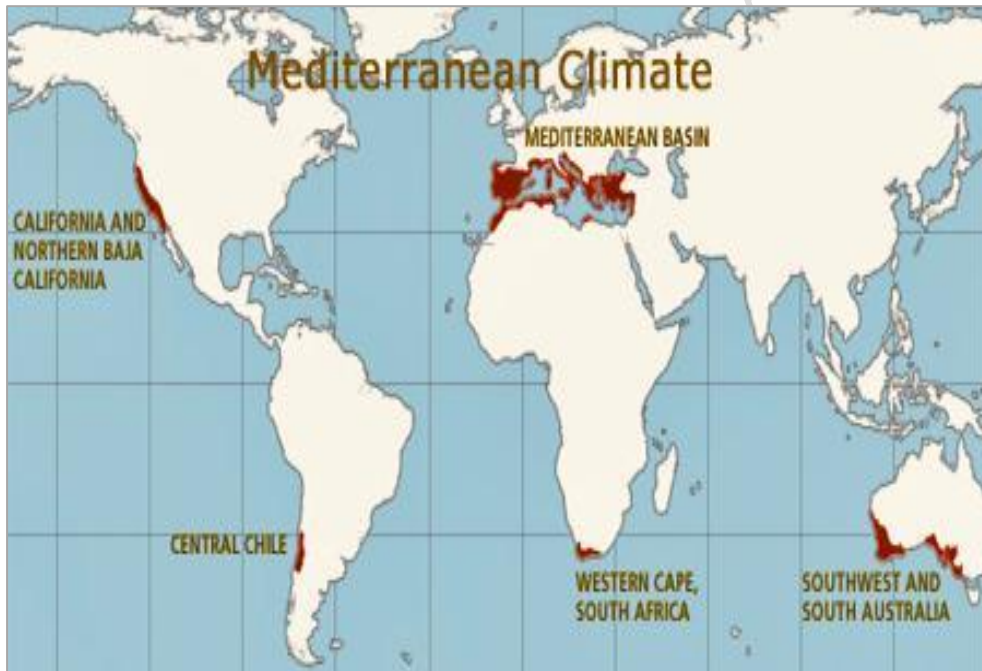
d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans) b

Exp) Mediterranean Agriculture

Mediterranean agriculture is highly specialised commercial agriculture. It is practised in the **countries on either side of the Mediterranean sea in Europe and in north Africa from Tunisia to the Atlantic coast, southern California, central Chile, south western parts of South Africa and south and south western parts of Australia.** This region is an important supplier of citrus fruits. (Options 1 and 2 are correct but option 3 is incorrect.)

Viticulture or grape cultivation is a speciality of the Mediterranean region. Best quality wines in the world with distinctive flavours are produced from high quality grapes in various countries of this region. The inferior grapes are dried into raisins and currants. This region also produces olives and figs. The advantage of Mediterranean agriculture is that more valuable crops such as fruits and vegetables are grown in winters when there is great demand in European and North American markets.



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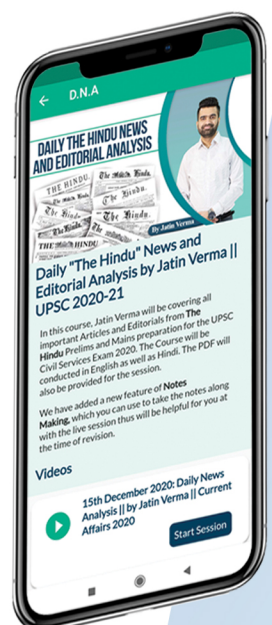
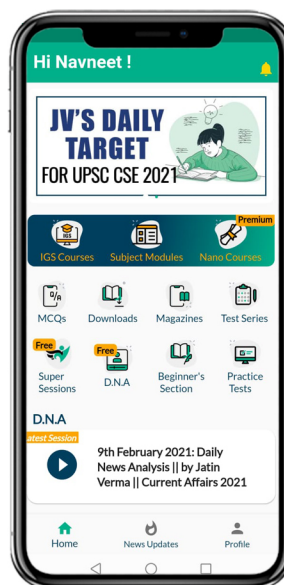
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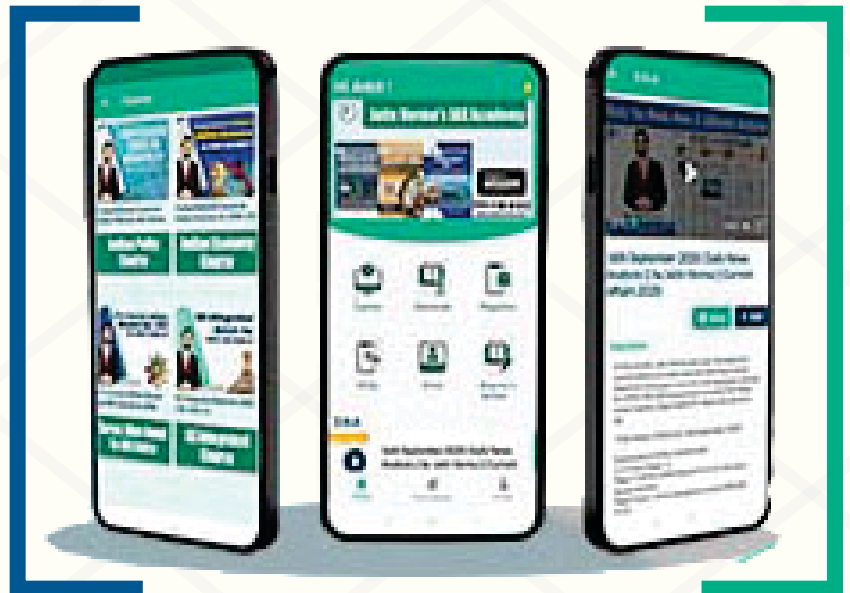
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